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By LEWIS B. PATTEN

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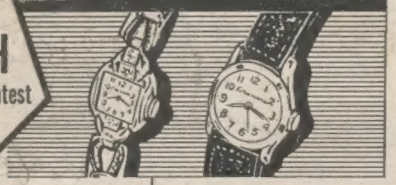

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See Sample Puzzle at Upper Right!

This contest consists of puzzles like the SAMPLE PUZZLE above. Note how we filled it in . . . how we identified the objects and found that certain letters in the names of the objects stood out from the rest, thus to spell out the name of the famous person pictured at the bottom. Read the explanation carefully.

Note how we identified each object with a word of as many letters as there are boxes in diagram accompanying it. In upper left we filled in word SHOE; in upper right, TIE. In lower left, TIGER; in lower right, PURSE. Note that some of the letters fell into boxes with a little circular frame inside. Those "circled" letters, arranged into proper order, spell out the famous name we are looking for.

Here, for example, the "circled" letters are H T R U. So we run through the names printed under the puzzle and discover Babe RUTH, whose last name is the correct solution, and whose picture you see at bottom.

SAMPLE PUZZLE

Solution is One of the Names Below:

Zane GREY — Henry CLAY
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"Four months after enrolling for NRI course, was able to service Radios . . . averaged $10 to $16 a week spare time. Now have full time Radio and Television business."—William Weyde, Brooklyn, New York.

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Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

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This Is Just Some of the Equipment My Students Build. All Parts Yours to Keep.

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION Technicians. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You also get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. Pictured at left, are just a few of the pieces of equipment you build with kits of parts I send. You experiment with, learn circuits common to Radio and Television.

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TV now reaches from coast-to-coast. Qualify for a good job as a service technician or operator. My course includes many lessons on TV. You get practical experience . . . work on circuits common to both Radio and Television with my kits. Now is the time to get ready for success in Television!

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XLV, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Spring, 1953

An Exciting Novel

RUSTLER'S RUN — Lewis B. Patten — 10
He was only a boy with a man's job to do but he hoped to be a credit to both of the women who counted on him

Two Romantic Novelets

GRIP OF THE WEST — Paul Randell Morrison — 58
Peggy was an expert with a rope and a branding iron, whether the critter she was after was a calf or a man

TO WED AN OREGON MAN — Jane Hardey — 92
She had already learned how to look after herself, but now she decided she'd rather have Chris do it

Short Stories

THE RANCHER TAKES A WIFE — Frank P. Castle — 43
The bride wore ruffles and lace, the groom a red face

ANYBODY'S MAN — Evelyn D. Rice — 51
The only match for a redhead is another redhead

MAN'S CHOICE — J. L. Bouma — 76
From now on, his gun would do his talking for him

SQUATTER'S RIGHTS — Jeanne Williams — 85
Jim could fence off his land, but not his heart . . . .

STRANGER IN THE SADDLE — Art Kercheval — 104
The game Marie played almost got her in trouble . . .

CHANGE PARTNERS — Stephen Payne — 107
He was used to winning prizes, and Lucy was a prize

Features

TENDERFOOT CORNER — Our Readers — 6
ROPE RASCALITY — Ferris Weddle — 9
RANGE TIDBITS — Harold Helfer — 71
RANGELAND RECORDS (Pee Wee King) — Pat Jones — 74
FIND THE REASON! (Verse) — Pecos Pete — 103

FANNY ELLSWORTH, *Editor*

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"My break came when I sent the coupon!"

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It will consist of contributions from our readers. Our only requirements are that you be an amateur writer or artist—not a professional—and that the work you submit be entirely your own. For each contribution that we use we shall pay $2.00. We cannot enter into correspondence concerning contributions, nor can we return unused material.

THE TORRENT

Leaping, foaming down the mountain,
On its way to meet the sea
Comes a roaring, rushing torrent,
And it seems to speak to me—
Speaks of things up in the mountains
Such as mortals seldom see.

Of the freezing nights in winter
When the wolves roam far and wide,
And the screaming of the panther
Wakes the quiet mountainside.
It tells of balmy days in summer
When the birds commence to sing,
And the soul of him who watches
Seems to grow, and swell and wing
Out across the far-off mountains
In the joy of the spring.
Thus spake to me the torrent,
Rushing fiercely by my side,
Leaping from the mountain heights
On its way to meet the tide.

Edward Goetz,
St. Louis, Mo.

BOMB SCARE

WHEN some twenty cars of a Santa Fé freight train derailed and overturned near Clovis, Texas, merchandise scattered for some distance. A rumor started that one of the broken cars had contained bombs which would be detonated by the bulldozers being used to clear the tracks. The Demolitions Squad from a near-by Air Force base rushed to the scene to remove the dangerous explosives. They turned out to be "Aerosol Bombs" for exterminating nothing more menacing than flies and mosquitoes.

Shirley Lassiter,
Farwell, Texas

WAIST LINES

Some hefty cowgals
Sure take the cake,
And that is why
Their figures shake.

Byron George,
Seattle, Wash.

RANCH HAND

Do you need a ranch hand, mister?
I am just a cowhand name o' Singing Dan.
I can throw the lariat
Right around the knob,
I am just a cowhand
A-lookin' for a job.

Did you say there's rustlers
A-hidin' in the draw?
I'll go 'bout and smoke 'em out
A-ridin' with the law.

I live to ride the prairie
A-singing all the day.
I'm just a cowhand
With a heart that's light and gay.

I can sleep in the bunkhouse,
I don't mind the draft.
Let me tame the bad ones,
I can spur them fore and aft.

I like to swing the ladies
And I shake a wicked hoof.
Take me on as ranch hand
If you want to see the proof.

Cowboy Jack
Santa Maria, Calif.

NO GILDED CAGE

In Texas, even the parrots are strong and silent. When a woman complained because her neighbor had taught his parrot some strong language, the parrot beat the rap. His owner denied the charge. No stool pigeon, the parrot kept his beak shut, and the charge was dismissed.

Millie Evans,
Denver, Colo.

COWBOY SINGIN' DAN

Illustration by Norman Kemp, Dallas, Texas

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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Peace is for the strong! For peace and prosperity save with U. S. Defense Bonds!

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ROPE RASCALITY

A Cowboy's Best Friend Is His Lariat

WHETHER it is called a rope, lasso, riata, lariat, or by some other name, the rope and the cowboy are inseparable. When not in legitimate use, the rope is a plaything and a source of trouble and fun. Cowboys have the peculiar habit of trying to rope anything that sits, runs or flies. In legend, they even rope cyclones and hurricanes.

Bears have long been a favorite target for rope-happy cowpokes. Usually, for obvious reasons, it is best to rope yearlings or cub bears, and to think twice before roping a cub if mama is around.

One old Wyoming cowpoke revealed the following typical incident to me.

The cowboy, Stan, had left ranch duties for a few days of hunting and fishing. While riding near a stream he came upon a large brown bear eating berries. Without thought of the consequences he unslung his rope, tossing it over the bear's head. The loyal cowhorse reared back, and was surprised when the bear, instead of running, turned and charged the horse and rider.

Stan whipped the horse about, and with the bear right at the animal's heels, took off. The terrain was rough and after a moment it was obvious that the bear was closing in! Stan tried to get his rifle from the saddle scabbard, but the horse's plunging movements made this impossible. The puncher decided it was time to cut the rope loose.

The bear, however, decided to continue the contest and kept right on coming. The loose rope was entangled in some roots, so that Stan was able to get his rifle free, and end the struggle with a well-placed bullet.

AMONG other things cowboys have been known to rope are antelope, deer, elk, mountain lions, wild cats, buffalo, wolves, coyotes, camels, eagles and vultures.

In early Texas, one exuberant cowpoke, seeing his first train, roped the smokestack. When his horse pulled to a halt, the pressure not only broke the rope but the saddle cinch as well, sending the startled puncher into the dust and hot cinders!

Both deer and elk are dangerous critters to rope.

Once a Montana puncher sighted a big buck deer in a steep-sided ravine, and decided to rope the animal. His rope cleared the antlers all right, but the buck objected in a savage manner, turning on the cowboy and his horse. Before the puncher could shoot the infuriated animal, it had badly gored the horse.

KNOWING the cowboy's inclination to rope anything in sight, roundup bosses always issued strict orders that a rope couldn't be taken down while a puncher was on cattle guard. One Wyoming waddy, on night guard, saw a figure stealing toward the horse remuda. Thinking that it was an Indian intent on stealing horses, he roped the prowler. The Indian let out a squawk and then—the skittish cattle herd stampeded.

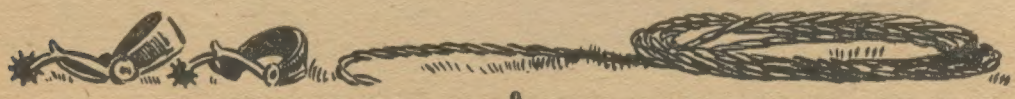
The cowboy got his thief, but he also got ten licks across the seat of his trousers for taking his rope down while on night duty!

Old-time fun-loving cowpokes didn't ignore one another as targets for ropes. It was considered a grand joke to rope a buddy out of the saddle, particularly if there were some cactus in the vicinity.

One of the best ways to sober up a drunk cowpoke who might be shooting up things in general was to rope him from the saddle.

There's a saying in the West that no cowpoke is going to be happy headed over the Great Divide unless he has a lasso to snag a few stars along the way.

—Ferris Weddle



by LEWIS B. PATTEN

He was only a boy with a man's job to do—

and two women counting on him to do it. . . .

LUCY CROSS

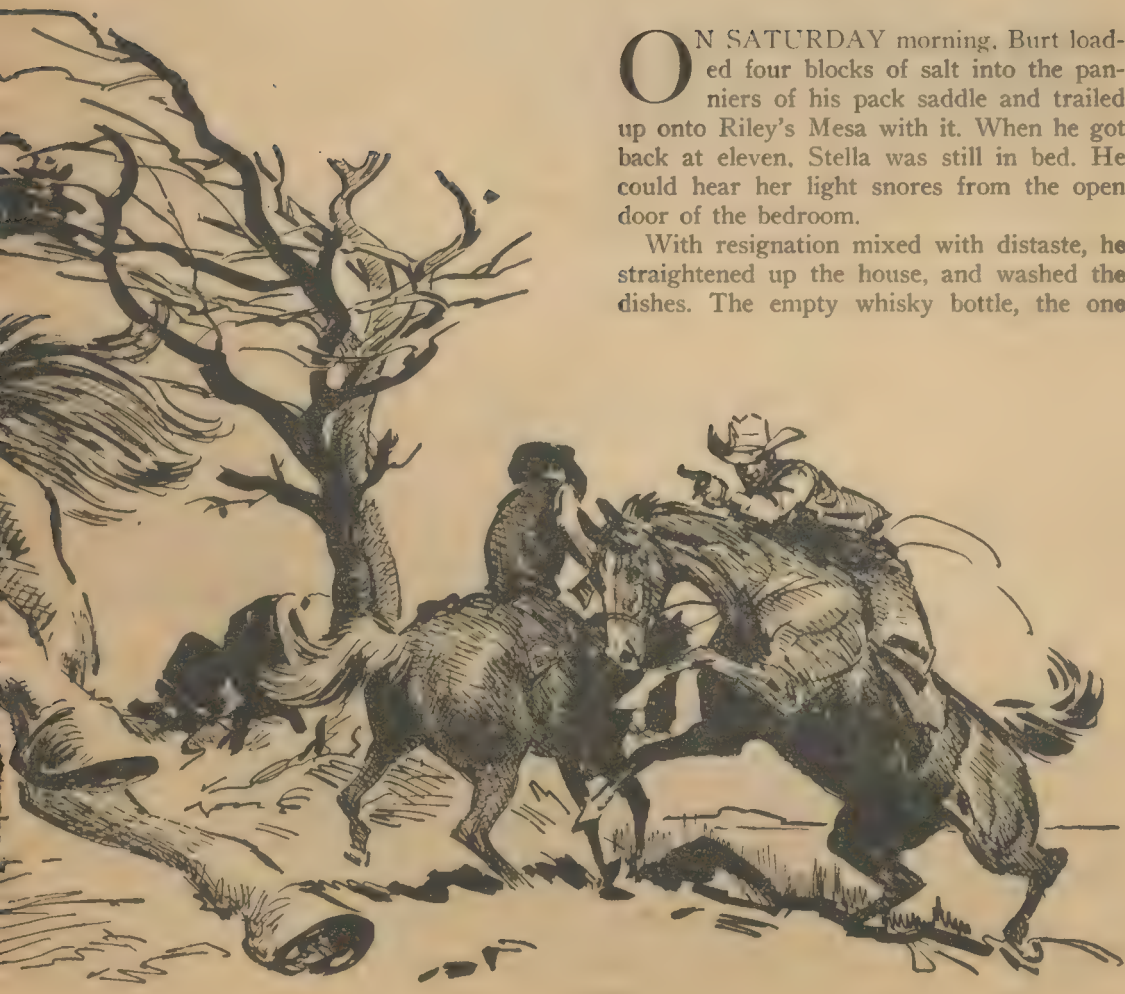
Rustler's Run

I

Girl Trouble

ON SATURDAY morning, Burt loaded four blocks of salt into the panniers of his pack saddle and trailed up onto Riley's Mesa with it. When he got back at eleven, Stella was still in bed. He could hear her light snores from the open door of the bedroom.

With resignation mixed with distaste, he straightened up the house, and washed the dishes. The empty whisky bottle, the one



Sam Shirer had brought, he tossed into the coal scuttle. Except for Sam's pursuit of Stella, he did not dislike the man. Yet he distrusted the whisky, and hated it for the things it did to her. He distrusted Sam for bringing it, aware that Sam had a purpose in bringing it, this purpose being to weaken the force of Stella's refusal.

When he had the dishes washed, he tossed the pan of soapy water out the door and picked up the broom. He was a tall kid of eighteen, whose face was too sober and brooding for his age, whose eyes held too much habitual bitterness.

Some devil of loneliness rode Stella. When she awoke today, she would be repentant, and for a while would be as good a mother to Burt as it was possible for her to be. She would wash and scrub, and if her remorse did not peter out too soon, would likely bake a dried apple pie. Tomorrow her eyes would again assume the old sombre look, and this would grow with the days and the weeks. . . .

Burt set the broom in the corner with a light shrug. His shoulders were thin, lacking flesh but not muscle, wide and sloping. His belly was flat below a good, deep chest. He snatched up a towel and a bar of strong soap, going out the sagging door, down the plain beaten path to the creek. Here he stripped off his clothes and walked into the water, into the deepest pool which came exactly to his knees.

He squatted and splashed water over himself, then stood while he lathered thoroughly. He kept thinking of the dance tonight at the schoolhouse in Mustang. He'd have his fun for a while, but it would end as it always ended, with cruel taunts that brought on the inevitable fighting in the soft dark behind the old log building.

He wondered briefly why he bothered to go. All he ever got out of it was the body soreness of too much pounding, skinned knuckles, a split lip and maybe a black eye. Yet deep within him was a vague awareness that not to go would be some kind of an admission, would be a retreat before Mitch Riorson and his brothers.

He splashed out of the water and dried himself on the gravelly bank, rubbing until the pink showed in his skin. He slipped on his pants and boots, and carrying shirt and towel returned toward the house, pausing for an instant at his own sleeping quarters in the bunkhouse for clean shirt and pants. Then he went on.

Stella came out of the bedroom as he entered, her eyes bloodshot, her face slack, her hair a black, gleaming tangle.

Burt said, "Mornin', ma," and she drew the faded robe closer about her, this being a gesture, a reaction. She would not meet his eyes. Shame rode her this morning, and in Burt stirred a peculiar compassion for her shame. He ought to hate her, and this he had told himself a thousand times. Yet hate is compounded of intolerance and a lack of understanding. She hurt him by her actions. She had made his life a continuing defense of her actions, her drinking. She put defiance and bravado into all of his relations with other people. Even so, he could understand the forces that drove her, and understanding cannot live with intolerance.

STELLA had never really recovered from Nick Norden's death. Essentially, she was a one-man woman; she had worshipped Nick, Burt's father; she had been one with him in a way that was beautiful and wonderful to see. When they had brought Nick's bullet-riddled body home sagging across his saddle, her hysteria, her lost and terrible screaming had been something Burt could never forget. Nor was he now able to forget the weeks, the months when Stella had sat in her rocker, face bleak and still from her thoughts, not eating, not sleeping. . . .

Liquor had brought release to Stella, liquor and Sam Shirer, and a couple of others before him, others who had stopped coming when they discovered that not even liquor could overcome Stella's stubborn loyalty to dead Nick Norden. Yet in a small community, a widow, whisky, late hours with a man could spell but one thing. So they talked about Stella, and the talk got back to her son. . . .

Because Burt knew she would not eat unless he fixed a meal and ate with her, he went outside and rummaged about the base of the haystack until he found four

eggs. When he came back in, she had combed her hair. He said, as he shaved a stick of kindling into the stove box, "I packed some salt over to Riley's Mesa. The grass is better up there than anywhere else this time of year, but the cattle won't go that far from water unless there's salt to tempt them."

"That's fine, Burt. You cleaned up in here, too." She waited a moment, a moment that dragged and dragged, finally saying in her soft and almost inaudible voice the thing Burt had known she must say, "Burt, I won't do it again."

"I know, ma. I know you won't."

He sliced bacon from the piece on the table, and laid the strips in the skillet. When the water in the coffee pot boiled, he dropped in a handful of coffee. The smell of bacon and coffee mingled in the room, growing strong and sharp. Stella made her silent fight against nausea, won, and took her place at the table, allowing Burt to serve her with crisp bacon and fried eggs.

Her eyes kept begging him until finally he said, "It's all right, ma. It's all right. There's a dance tonight. I'm going."

"You taking Lucy?"

He shrugged. "Haven't asked her. I'll ride past there on the way to town. You want anything from the store?"

"I guess not." She looked at Burt in a puzzled way, her still-smooth forehead making a frown. "Burt—Burt, I wish you wouldn't go tonight."

"Why?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "It was a feeling I had. It's gone now."

Burt got up from the table. He changed his pants and put on the clean shirt. Stella smiled, saying, "Go on with you. Have a good time."

HE WENT outside, got his saddle and bridle from the barn, going then to the corral. He took his rope from the saddle and shook out a loop as he went through the corral gate. Dread became suddenly concrete and physical within him. His fights with Mitch Riorson had become more savage as time went on. Though he would not put words to his uneasiness, he knew that the time was not far off when these fights must reach killing intensity.

He swung into his saddle, riding out the four or five stiff-legged jumps the Roman-nosed gray made, then raising a hand to Stella in the doorway. She was a tall and dark-haired woman, whose body showed none of the fullness of approaching middle-age. Her face was smooth and unlined. Except for haunted loneliness, her eyes were soft and warm, gray and clear. She was thirty-five, too young not to need a man, but having her standards set high because of Nick Norden, it would take a good man to fill Nick's place in Stella's heart. She had not found him yet. Perhaps she never would.

Stella gave him a farewell smile, a smile forced and strained, and left with him the vaguest feeling of unhappiness, a feeling that rode with him all the way to Clevis Cross.

Norden's N Bar outfit lay on an upland meadow, traversed by a narrow creek, backed against the steep and darkly timbered slopes of the Virginia Peaks. Before N Bar's meadow lay a dropoff of five hundred feet to the turbulent waters of the Bear. The road rose from the banks of the Bear here, in steep switchbacks, to wind through Norden's meadow before dropping again into the valley that widened like a funnel as it approached the town of Mustang.

All along this road, and all the roads of this country, the slopes were dotted with the brown scars of mine dumps. In earlier times, the valley of the Bear had been mining country, until the richest of the veins had petered out, until transportation became a thing that took the profit out of the remaining low-grade ores.

Halfway to town, another road bridged the river to disappear into the timber, and it was this turning which Burt took. It wound upward, over this high ridge, to descend into the wide valley of Clevis Cross and of the Riorson's Rocking R on the other side.

In late afternoon sunlight, the strong and pungent odors of pine resins became a solid and pleasant thing in the still air. The rustlings along the trail were nearly continu-

ous as wild creatures scurried away from the sound of approaching hooves.

Below, as the timber thinned, Burt could see the buildings of Clevis Cross, scattered in haphazard fashion through the short meadow grass. A new haystack, not yet darkened by sun and rain, stood green and fresh beside the big log barn. Above, in haze-shrouded distance, a sawmill whined, the sawmill of the Riorsons, and there, a blue cloud of smoke raised.

RIDING through the yard, Burt nodded at the two punchers, patiently working a frightened bay colt, and dismounted beside the long screened porch which opened into the kitchen. A shaggy dog came from beneath this porch, his tail awag, and sniffed at Burt's legs in friendly fashion, begging abjectly with his eyes for a pat on the head. Burt reached down and scratched his ears, calling through the screening, "Hey! Anybody home?"

"Come in, Burt!" A girl's voice, carefully without expression.

He went in, finding Lucy ironing a dress at the long kitchen table. Shyness touched him and a consciousness of his gangling awkwardness. This was the way between them now, she pink-faced, he clumsy and tongue-tied. He grunted, "Dance tonight. Want to go?"

She faced him, putting aside her iron, a small and fair-haired girl of sixteen, delicately rounded, her full lips compressed, her smooth face turning pale with resentment. "You! Do you think I'll sit here and hold my breath waiting for you to get around to asking me to the dance? I'll have you know there are lots of boys who'd like to take me. I'll have you know that I can go with any boy I want!" She tossed her shoulder-length blonde hair so that it brushed her cheeks, high-colored with defiance.

Her outburst startled and puzzled him. For an instant he stammered, then saying the first thing that came into his head, "What's eatin' you? You ain't never had to be asked ahead of time before."

"Well, I do know. I'm going with Mitch Riorson. He asked me yesterday. I guess he likes me as well as you do, and he knows how to treat a girl."

Burt felt the flush of anger rising to his face. Awkwardness was suddenly gone from him. Beneath the unreasonable stirring of anger was a deep and bitter disappointment. Theirs had been a boy and girl relationship, very casual, very undemanding. Always, when he had come to see her, her welcome had been matter-of-fact, with none of this unfathomed perversity to complicate it.

He guessed the change had come about less than a week past, that dark, rainy day, Monday. Riding together at the head of Clevis Cross's meadow, caught by a sudden squall, they had left their horses and run to the shelter of a tiny, one-room cabin. Laughing, drenched, it had come about spontaneously, Lucy in his arms, the kiss, her cold face snuggling against his neck afterward.

Remembrance gave him delicious shivers whenever he thought of it.

Now he was discovering that Monday had been the end of something, the end of easy camaraderie, the beginning of something else.

He asked, "You mad at me for Monday?"

Her stare was long and level, showing none of her thoughts, only the plain hostility generated by them. Her voice became tight and small. "Why should I be mad? Why should I?" Only her eyes cried out, "You didn't need to wait a whole week! You could have come back! Didn't it mean anything to you at all? You've spoiled it! You've spoiled it!"

Burt wanted to plead with her, yet pride became stiff-backed, and would not let him. He said darkly, "You want to watch out for that Mitch Riorson. You want to watch out for him, that's all."

He whirled and tramped through the door. On the porch steps he stumbled, recovered himself with burning cheeks and mounted with considerably more haste than skill.

The startled gray bolted, yet recklessness and anger would not permit Burt to check him, and so he went away at a hard run, seething with still another reason for fighting Mitch Riorson tonight, not caring now how bitter or intense the fighting might become, nor how hurt he might get.

II

Too Many Riorsons

DOWN the long valley, the valley that wound its narrowing way a full fifteen miles above the Riorsons's sawmill, came John Cross in late afternoon, grim of face, followed by eight silent and grim-faced Clevis punchers. At the Riorsons's fence he dismounted, and held the wire gate, scowling as his men rode through, then refastening it and mounting.

Seeing them, Dan Riorson, heavy and thick, came hurrying down the road to intercept them as they passed his house. "Well John?"

"Nothing! Not a damned thing! Tally shows eighteen more head gone and not a trace to show where. I had men at the pass, men on this road. Today we rode Timberline Ridge looking for tracks. Elk tracks aplenty, but no cattle tracks or horse tracks either. Somebody's getting cattle out of here. I'm out over two hundred since the first of the year. Pitchfork below me has lost over a hundred. Guiry's lost as many as I have. Somebody's getting rich."

Turned irritable by failure, he suddenly asked, "How many you lost, Riorson?"

Dan Riorson, whose broad Irish face had heretofore held a secret glint of amusement, suddenly stepped forward, laying a heavy hand on Cross's bridle. "You mean anything special by that question, John?" There was dull anger in the red of his face, truculence in the set of his jaw.

Cross felt moved to temper the veiled accusation that had been in his remark, yet some new stubbornness sealed his lips. Impatience stirred him, and suddenly Dan Riorson became an object on which he could vent his frustration. Spurs in his horse's sides sent the animal lunging forward, against the restraining hand of Dan Riorson. Riorson was solid, thick. He held on. The horse reared, striking with his forefeet. One of them struck Riorson's shoulder, and knocked him sprawling. Cross held his horse still with a heavy hand, facing the irate Irishman as he rose to his knees. He felt a sudden regret for this, yet there was no apology in him, no retreat. He said, "Keep your damned hands off 'till you're ready for a fight, Dan."

Riorson's eyes glittered. He stood, spraddle legged, heavy and squat and dangerous. A gun sat fat and ready at his solid thigh, yet he made no move toward it. He growled, "Eight men at your back. Try me when you're alone sometime, John."

"I'll do that." Cross's sense of wrongness was on the increase, but the devil of stubbornness remained. Without further talk, he reined around and went down the road at a gallop, his eight punchers close-packed behind.

At five, he came into the yard at Clevis Cross and swung off his horse, handing up the reins to Dorian, the foreman. He stalked to the house to find Lucy, her light hair in curlers, basting a steaming beef roast on the oven door.

It was with an obvious effort that John Cross controlled his irritability. He grunted, "Hmmmm. Dance tonight, eh?"

Lucy nodded, rising and smiling, yet there was no happiness, no anticipation in this smile.

"Who you going with, that Norden kid?"

"No. Mitch Riorson."

IT BROUGHT him around, irritability forgotten in the rise of surprise and uneasiness. He had interfered little in Lucy's life since she had assumed care of the house at Clevis Cross, feeling that if she was mature enough for this, she was mature enough to order her own life without interference. He had not missed the talk about Stella Norden. He had known that eventually talk that touched Stella and Burt must touch Lucy too, if she continued to see Burt. Yet his opposition to Burt had been passive, made thus by his instinctive liking for the boy. He had hoped for another young man in Lucy's life, another to give Burt competition.

Finding that it was Mitch Riorson suddenly moved him to anger. He said, "Stay away from him. He's the meanest of that whole damned clan. There ain't a horse on

Riorson's place that won't roll his eyes and back off when Mitch comes near him."

He saw the rise of defiance in Lucy, and with unexpected wisdom changed the subject. "How's your ma?"

"The same. She coughs a lot."

"I'll go see her." Turned vaguely unhappy by Lucy's date with Mitch, filled with helplessness in the face of slow and steady rustling of his cattle, he went out of the kitchen and climbed the creaking stairs to Mrs. Cross's room.

She lay passively in the middle of the big four-poster bed, pale and thin, gaunt of face, hollow of eye. He said, his voice gentle, "Faith. How you feeling?"

"All right." Her smile was apologetic. "I'll get up tomorrow. This big house is too much for a girl."

He nodded. "For a little while, if you want." He sat down beside her on the bed, a big and red-faced man, full of man's unreasonableness and occasional savagery, but moved to gentleness in the presence of this frail woman who was so familiar to him. She would not get up tomorrow, or any tomorrow, he admitted to himself. This was simply a ritual which she went through with him, only for the purpose of letting him know she had not given up hope.

He bent and kissed her forehead. "How long?" he wondered. "How long?"

She asked, "How is the work going, John?"

"Fine. Fine." He had kept this rustling business from her, this rustling that had no apparent solution and which had kept getting steadily worse since it started something over a year ago. There seemed little point in adding another worry to those she already bore.

Now she asked, her voice turned weak, "Lucy's going with Burt?"

For an instant John Cross's face darkened. Then he shrugged. "Who else?" he evaded.

"He's a good boy. His mother is a fine woman. How is she standing the loss of her husband, John?"

She reminded John suddenly by her talk how long she had been bed-ridden. She did not know then how Stella had stood the loss of Nick Norden. Her visitors, knowing her attachment to Stella Norden and showing surprising reticence, had never mentioned the gossip concerning Stella in her presence. Again, John evaded, "She still grieves."

"I'll get up tomorrow and go visit her."

"All right." He never argued with Faith. Tomorrow she would swing her legs over the side of the bed with full intentions of getting up. But weakness would claim her before she could stand, and she would murmur, "I am weak today. I'll do it tomorrow."

He smoothed her forehead tenderly with his hand, finding it feverish and damp. "Go to sleep," he murmured. "I'll bring you something to eat after Lucy's gone."

Faith nodded and smiled. John Cross went from the room, saddened and depressed.

DURING dinner he was grim and silent. His mind wrestled futilely with the mystery of the vanishing cattle, settling finally upon the touchiness of Dan Riorson as the one slight opening in the blank wall of his puzzlement. Lucy finished before him and went to her room to prepare for the dance. As he was finishing his coffee, he heard hooves in the yard, and went to the door.

Mitch Riorson tied his buckboard team to a tree and strode toward him, squat and heavy as was Dan Riorson, his father, heavy of brow and lip. Mitch made a smile, showing large, white teeth as his lips split away from them. It was Mitch's eyes that bothered John Cross the most. Narrow-lidded and narrow set in his broad face, they were entirely without warmth. Mitch Riorson occasionally could smile with his heavy lips. John Cross had never seen his smile extend to his eyes. Mitch was eighteen. He carried a gun, and he carried a knife, not being particularly skillful with either.

Fists were Mitch Riorson's long suit—and knees and elbows and feet. These were the things he had used on his brothers during the eighteen years of his life, and he had become expert with them.

Mitch asked, "Lucy ready?"

"Not quite." Cross hesitated a moment,

Blindly Burt brought up the carbine

saying finally, "I damned near made an issue of this tonight. I'm surprised Dan didn't. after the jangle I had with him this afternoon." He felt his anger rise and his voice with it, and found himself powerless to stop. He said, "You be careful. You be damned careful or I'll take it out of your hide. You understand?"

"Ahhhh . . . . " Cross never knew what Mitch might have said, for he heard Lucy's step on the porch behind him. Her face was still and unsmiling. She planted a dutiful peck on John Cross's cheek and stepped lightly toward the buckboard. The horses laid back their ears as Mitch took up the reins. Cross called, "Drive like you had some sense," and knew the instant he uttered it that the admonition was futile. At a fast trot the horses went out of the meadow, and where the road entered the timber, broke into a run.

John Cross cursed, and slammed the door with unaccustomed violence as he entered the house.

III

"Murder Will Out"

ONLY stubbornness kept Burt Norden pointed toward town after he left Clevis Cross that afternoon—stubbornness, anger and the fixed notion that he should be on hand to see that nothing happened to Lucy in Mitch's Riorson's company.

The town of Mustang lay at the point where Bear River entered the deep, dark and narrow canyon for its racing, plunging passage to the plain. No roads nor trails traversed that deep cleft in naked rock, and only the river passed through it, narrowed to fifty feet in places, dropping so swiftly between the sheer towering wells that it assumed an incredible speed.

Nothing, in the memory of man, had ever passed down that canyon and lived. Horses occasionally were swept into it, to emerge a short hour later on the plain, battered and lifeless. A man had once tried it in a boat, and broken bits of the boat were all that were ever found.

Half of Mustang lay on one side of the river, joined to the other half by a stout, timber bridge. The entrance to the canyon was a short quarter mile from the bridge, and on most nights, the roar of cascading water in the canyon was clearly audible in the town.

The road out of Mustang wound upward across a high ridge, dropping then in gradual stages through heavy timber, to emerge on the plain twenty miles and countless switchbacks later.

Burt dismounted at the big livery barn, and led his horse inside. He offsaddled and rubbed the gray's back briefly with a sack. Then he led the animal outside, watered him, and was forking hay to the horse when the hostler, Jed Priest, came from the poolhall and stopped to watch, fashioned a wheatstraw cigarette with his calloused fingers.

"In for the dance, kid?"

Burt nodded, fished in his pocket for a quarter and handed the money to Priest.

"Where's your gal?"

A frail attempt at defense made Burt say defiantly, "Who?"

"Why Lucy Cross. Who else?"

"She's coming with Mitch."

"Had a spat, huh?"

Anger spilled over in Burt at Jed's gentle prying. Angry words rose in his throat, but he stifled them, for in Jed's seamed features was only friendliness. Jed had a strong and gamey smell, the smell of horses and sweat, of manure and beer and garlic. His eyes were bright blue, now showing considerable understanding. "You just come for the fight then, I reckon."

Burt was silent, wanting to get away, made uncomfortable by Jed's persistence. Jed said, "Watch Mitch, son. Watch them sneaky brothers of his. Don't ever let 'em rig you into a fight anywheres but there at the dance where there's other people around to see you get a fair shake."

"I guess I can look out for myself."

Jed shrugged. "Mebbe. Mebbe not. I see the way Riorson's horses act around Mitch. They're an ornery outfit, boy, and don't you forget it, from the old man on down. But Mitch is the worst." He seemed to drop the

subject of Mitch as abruptly as he had taken it up, then saying, "You been losin' cattle?"

"I'm out five. Strayed over Timberline Ridge onto Cross's range, I reckon. I got to get over there and hunt for them—tomorrow maybe."

Jed grunted. "Funny thing. The only ones losin' cattle is them that runs with Clevis Cross above the Riorsons's place. What you want to bet you never see them five again?"

Burt frowned. "You think—"

Jed interrupted hastily, "I don't think a damned thing! It ain't safe to think in this country." He seemed suddenly to lose interest in Burt. Turning, he fished a plug of tobacco from his pocket and bit off a piece. He picked up a fork and began to clean a stall.

Burt hesitated a moment, then turned uncertainly, heading out of the stable and toward town. For no tangible reason, his thoughts turned to his father.

NICK NORDEN had been found on Clevis Cross range. His errand in that long valley had been to locate strays. When he did not return, Burt had gone to look for him, well knowing that a horse can fall, a man can be thrown, any of a dozen accidents can happen to a lone rider. He had been prepared to find his father hurt. He had not been prepared to find him dead, shot half a dozen times with a high-powered rifle.

The nightmare of that day was etched permanently on his brain, having even now the power to turn him cold with horror. Again he experienced the terrible sense of loss he had known that day, followed by a boy's tortured grief and helplessness, and the inevitable need for revenge, to kill the killer of his father.

More than a year had passed since then. The sheriff, over special from the county seat, had spent a week at Mustang and riding the countryside. It had been a futile thing. The sheriff had found no clues, had been unable to uncover a motive. Nick Norden, big and good natured, had been well liked throughout the country. Why should anyone want to kill him? Why? Burt was

[*Turn page*]

certain that when he could answer that question, he could also name the killer.

Yet time has its way of slipping past. Burt could not forever ride the country searching for a shadow. With Nick gone, the running of the ranch fell upon his inexperienced shoulders. There was hay to put up, salt to pack, endless riding to be done. There were fences to be fixed, chores to be done twice daily. These things kept a steady ache in Burt's stringy body, kept his brain dull with fatigue, gave him no time to puzzle over the insoluble problem of his father's murder.

Life went on. Stella brooded and grew bitter; she turned to liquor and seemed unable to stop herself. Eventually she would become what the country already accused her of being. The memory of Nick Norden faded in Burt, as time fades all memories.

Yet some day, and of this Burt was sure, someone would turn a stone and under it would lie the answer. John Cross had put the words to it, "Murder will out." It was for this that Burt waited, but the waiting seemed endless.

He headed through the deep dust in the street for the poolhall, the hot afternoon sun against his back making welcome the thought of the cool half dark of the place, the idle click of ball against ball.

There was time to be passed before it would be late enough for the dance to begin. There was no place in town where a boy might spend this time save for the poolhall.

Beneath the board awning of Gundersen's Grocery, he met Mrs. Gundersen, who had just come from the door, broom in hand, to sweep off the walk. Burt touched the brim of his hat, saying, "Howdy, ma'am."

Her attention came around to him, with the faintest thinning of her lips, the slightest hardening of her eyes. Because she was a businesswoman, and because the Nordens had always traded with her, she forced from herself the grudging smile that never hid her disapproval, but only seemed to accentuate it. "Hello, Burt."

Her glance held him still for a moment, fidgeting uneasily. Perhaps with some thought for the unpaid balance of the Nordens's account, waiting shipping time for settlement, she asked carefully, "How are had told Jed Priest. "I'm only out five, you folks making out? Are you losing cattle?"

He repeated stolidly for her what he ma'am. Strayed, I reckon. I'll ride over to Clevis Cross tomorrow to hunt for them."

He went on to the poolhall, finding it nearly empty. Idly he chose a cue and racked the balls. The click of balls became a somnolent sound, and gradually he became preoccupied with the satisfaction of his shots, which were skillful and precise. Unnoticed, the sun dropped against the timbered horizon and sank from sight. Coolness flowed down the slopes like water. Wind drifted townward from the gorge, bringing the roaring noise of the plunging river, making a sort of ominous murmur that became a background for the sharper street noises.

WAGONS bearing the ranch owners, their wives and children, began rolling into the town. Almost to a man, they drew up before the hotel to discharge their passengers, then rumbled downstreet to the livery barn. Cowpunchers came horseback, freshly shaved, scrubbed until they shone, wearing their best and with their hair slicked down with grease.

Mitch Riorson drove the Riorson buckboard in, and beside him, Lucy's face was white and scared. Mitch's team was heavily lathered from running, and upon their wet backs were the fresh marks of his whip. He drew up before the hotel as Burt came from the poolhall, and Burt paused there, watching as Lucy jumped lightly down and went up the hotel steps. Mitch Riorson howled and laid the whip across the backs of his team.

Burt became suddenly conscious of the grinning stares from the loungers' bench, and from behind him came some coolly insolent remark, which he failed to catch, but which drew a shout of ribald laughter. Flushing and reckless, Burt swung around, his eyes seeking vainly for the one who had spoken. With no thought for the ridiculousness of this he said sharply, "What?" and when he got no answer, "If anybody has got anything to say, just step out and say it.

real plain so's I can hear."

He had expected nothing but the abashed and downcast eyes, the occasional conciliatory grin. A man at the end murmured, "We kid a lot, Burt, but there ain't no thorns in it." Another said, "I'll put five to three on Burt tonight."

Suddenly angry, Burt stalked away, following the street toward the saloons at its lower end. Ho's Restaurant stopped him, with its smells of frying meat, and hungry with youth's ravenousness, he turned into it. The only empty stool was beside curly-haired Pete Guiry, a year older than Burt, from the Guiry spread below Clevis Cross. Burt sat down and gave his order for steak and spuds to the gleaming-faced Chinese. He muttered, "Hello, Pete. You for the dance?"

"You bet. Burt, I got a bottle stashed in the weeds back of the schoolhouse. You see me tonight."

Burt nodded sociably, but without any intention of complying. This was the way it was. The women of the community would allow no drinking within the confines of the schoolhouse. Yet beside each fencepost was a bottle, behind each clump of brush.

In early evening the dance progressed with vaguely uncomfortable amiability, until the cached liquor began to take effect. Then all of the hidden and secret animosities exploded to find expression in the solid thump of fist on flesh. A good many of the more prominent families would leave before that time. Most of the young ones would stay on, the Riorsons, Pete Guiry, Burt, a dozen others.

Burt thought of Lucy, of her white-faced fright. He began to anticipate the inevitable meeting with Mitch; he began to feel a heady and rising recklessness.

He knew that Mitch would take the trip to Pete Guiry's bottle often tonight, and would grow more savage with each trip. He knew with abrupt surety that he must somehow take Lucy home himself. If he whipped Mitch tonight, Mitch would take his surly resentment out on Lucy, on his buckboard team. If Mitch whipped him, it would be much the same, except that Mitch's prod would be the intoxication of victory. Either way, Lucy would be subjected not only to fright and terror at the way Mitch drove, but to real danger as well.

Burt realized he was shaking, and again felt the odd premonition which had bothered him earlier today. For no tangible reason, he thought of Stella's words, "It was a feeling I had. It's gone now."

Inevitably, if the fighting with blocky and savage Mitch Riorson continued, a time would come when animosity and hatred reached killing intensity. Perhaps that time was tonight.

Sweating lightly, Burt paid for his meal and rose. With his young face grim, he walked purposefully toward the schoolhouse.

IV

Fight to the Finish

THE schoolhouse at Mustang was a large log building with but a single room inside. For this occasion, desks had been shoved all to one side, and sat there in a triple row against the wall, providing seats for the onlookers, for those who would rather watch then participate.

Lanterns hung from a beam down the center of the room, ten in all, and at one end was a raised platform, holding a piano and half a dozen straightbacked chairs. In one of these sat frail and hunchbacked Kenny Boorom, drawing bow across fiddlestrings, tuning up. A polite crowd of womenfolk clustered about the long table on the opposite wall from the bunched desks, stirring and sampling the punch. Beside the door, as Burt entered, he heard old man Guiry mutter, "A man ought to spike that punch a bit. I'll tell you, boys, walk up there with me and crowd the womenfolks aside, and I'll dump in this bottle I've got."

A guffaw answered his suggestion, and the crowd of them moved away, chuckling, for all the world like a bunch of boys anticipating a prank. One of them whispered, "Them women'll have a better time tonight than they've ever had, an' they won't know why."

Burt looked around, found Lucy sitting

demurely at one of the desks, Mitch Riorson surly and redfaced beside her. As he watched, Pete Guiry came in, going directly to Mitch, and after a short discussion, the two moved across the floor and out the door.

Lucy sent a look toward Burt that was fear-filled and beseeching. He went over, saying nothing, and the red came into her face before she murmured, "Could you manage to take me home tonight, Burt? He scares me. He drives like crazy."

"All right. I'll go down to the stable and hire a rig." Strangeness lay between them, turning Lucy shy, making Burt uncomfortably warm. He turned to go, but she rose, laid a small hand on his arm. "Burt, I'm sorry. I'll slip outside and wait. Then you won't have to fight him."

He stiffened. "I guess I can handle him. You stay here. I won't go sneaking away and you hadn't ought to ask me to."

He saw the rise and fall of protest in her, and with her standing wordless, he turned away. He went directly down-street to the stable, and came back twenty minutes later driving a hired buckboard, which he tied in a clump of trees a hundred yards from the schoolhouse. As he entered, the piano began to bang, the fiddler broke into a lively tune. Mitch swaggered to Lucy and yanked her to her feet. Burt took a step forward, then forced himself to halt. Not yet . . . not yet. . . .

The dance gained momentum. Sweat began to glisten on the men's foreheads. Jed Priest, hair slicked down but otherwise unchanged, called the dance in his high and penetrating voice.

Fingers tugged at Burt's sleeve, and Pete Guiry murmured, "Come on. You ain't tried my jug yet."

Killing his reluctance, Burt followed outside into the soft and velvet darkness. Pete found the bottle, uncorked it and offered it to Burt. It was half empty. Pete said softly, "You better watch Mitch tonight, Burt. He left his gun in the buckboard, but he's carrying his knife. He's getting lit and turning mean. He's bragging that he'll cut your liver out."

Burt choked on the liquor, going into a spasm of coughing. He gasped, spluttered, and Pete Guiry laughed. "Too strong, huh?" He took the bottle from Burt, drank, and manfully controlled his involuntary shudder.

WARMTH began to grow in Burt's stomach, and an odd and overpowering feeling of well-being. He had a fleeting feeling that tonight, all things might be possible. For no particular reason, he thought of the five strays he was missing. He said, "Your outfit runs with Clevis Cross. You see anything of five of mine up there lately?"

Pete corked the bottle and put it carefully away. "No. John Cross rode this week. Pa and me rode the week before. We didn't see none of yours." He stood up, and moved slowly toward the lights. He said in a puzzled voice, "We're out two hundred since the first of the year. How the hell do they get 'em out of there? They don't bring 'em past our place; they don't bring 'em through Clevis Cross. The only other way out of there is over Timberline Ridge, or over the pass, and we've had men watching for that."

"How many're the Riorsons missing?"

"Dan says forty. Pa doubted it and made a rough check. Looks like the truth."

They approached the schoolhouse, and old man Guiry's deep voice came from the crowd, "Hell, I'll put a man to watchin' every damned critter I've got if I have to. I'll stop it. I tell you I'll stop it someway."

Agatha Guiry appeared in the lighted doorway, calling sharply into the darkness, "Roy! Roy, you come in."

Pete went up the steps after his father, and Burt followed, still with the unaccustomed warmth in the pit of his stomach. He stood in the light crowd at the door, watching the dance, and out of the press of bodies somewhere came Mitch Riorson's deliberate taunt, "I ain't seen Sam Shirer tonight. Now where you reckon he could be?"

Burt thought, "Here it is." Tension came to all his muscles, and a tight, choked feeling to his throat. He was not afraid of Mitch, he told himself, yet he could feel his face paling. Mitch shoved through the crowd, which had now assumed an expectant quiet. A soft voice beside Burt murmured, "Now don't you mind, boy. Don't pay no mind to him."

Mitch stopped before him, truculent and palely vicious. "I'll make it plainer. Sam won't get back to town 'till morning. You started callin' him pa yet, Burt?"

Burt's fist swung wildly out, catching Mitch squarely on his flat flaring nose. Blood ran redly across Mitch's face. A man yelled, "Here. None of that in here. Take it outside, boys."

But Burt had followed his attack; with flailing fists he now drove Mitch back into the press of bodies. They gave way before him, and Mitch went sprawling on the smooth dance floor.

Burt sought to leap upon him, but hands caught at him held him away. Mitch got to his feet, narrow-eyed, grinning wicked anticipation. "Sure," he said. "Let's take it outside."

Somewhere Burt could hear Lucy's soft crying. A way opened to the door, and around Mitch and Burt closed the bodies of the men. Behind them rose sharp voices of outrage, the women. "Every time!" one said. And another, "That Norden woman! Why don't she—"

"The boy's as bad. Fighting—drinking—heaven-knows-what-all. I'd never let my girl go around with him, I can tell you that."

BURT felt the steps under his feet, then the hard-packed dirt of the schoolyard. He heard Mitch's throaty chuckle not far away. He moved with the crowd, and presently found himself within a small circle. At one side of this circle stood a man with a lantern. Mitch half crouched across from him, grinning in his evil way. Out in the darkness a voice cried, "Fight! Fight! Hurry up!"

Mitch said, "All right," and came forward, a little bowlegged, a little crouched. Burt swung forward with a rush. His fists went out, smashed against the thatch of Mitch's hair and his solid skull beneath, as Mitch ducked his head. Pain shot clear to Burt's elbows. He backed off, and now Mitch straightened, bringing a ponderous fist upward in an arc that ended in Burt's groin. A murmur of protest rose from the crowd, and a voice counseled, "Fight him his way, Burt. Dirty."

Belly-sickness and nausea flooded Burt. His head reeled with dizziness, and bright, swimming spots danced before his eyes. Instinctively, he retreated, waiting for this to pass. Mitch was a blurred, advancing shape before his eyes. As he backed, a foot protruded from the rim of the circle, tripped him, and he went backward helplessly, feeling the shock of the ground suddenly at his back.

A growl of triumph rumbled in Mitch's throat. He came forward at a lumbering run, and when he was yet a yard from Burt, launched himself, feet first, in a clumsy, but effective jump.

His big feet, with his weight behind them, landing in Burt's belly, would have ended the fight once and for all, there then remaining only the pounding against ineffective resistance, that would reduce Burt's face to a swollen pulp. But Burt rolled, at the same time raising his legs, so that Mitch's feet came against his hip, found uneven, shifting footing, and slipped away. Mitch tumbled forward, landing beside Burt, and Burt's elbow went out, burying itself in Mitch's groin.

There was an instant's advantage here for Burt, and he took it, surging to his feet. Mitch was also raising, but as Burt came erect, Mitch was only as far as his knees. A moment ago, Burt would have stepped away and allowed Mitch to rise, for the memory of Mitch's dirty fighting in the past had dimmed. Yet now rage had possessed Burt, and a savagery which faintly surprised him. Automatically, with no conscious prompting, his knee came up, swiftly vicious, and slammed with a loudly audible crack against the point of Mitch's jaw.

Mitch's eyes glazed instantly, and his thick-lipped mouth went slack and loose. Burt's fist, in a roundhouse swing, came whistling against the side of Mitch's head, high against his ear, and threw him sideways, off his knees and flat in the dust. Following this advantage, Burt leaped down, white and shaking with fury.

His fists made their short, powerful swings, smashing Mitch's lips, his nose, his eyes. Mitch rolled and raised his hands ineffectively. A snarling curse escaped him.

One of his hands, his right, he pulled away from his defense, put it back of him, under him.

Faintly Burt heard the yell, "He's goin' for his knife! Watch him!"

This was the fear in Burt, not of fists and knees, but of sharp, cold steel. Something cold spread outward from his stomach, with its paralyzing effect, and helplessly he saw Mitch's right hand come clear with the eight inch blade. A yell, "Get his hand, kid! Grab it!" came from the crowd, came dimly through the roaring in Burt's ears.

Mitch was trying to roll, still pinned to the ground by Burt's weight, and when he found he could not, brought the knife-hand sweeping upward in an awkward thrust. The knife found resistance in Burt's thigh, bit into it with its instantaneous, burning pain, and blood flooded from the gash.

SUDDENLY the rage Burt had experienced before was nothing. New fury soared through him, obliterating all pain, all feeling, all thought. He rolled away from the biting blade, a forearm flung across Mitch's neck to provide leverage.

Mitch choked from the force of Burt's arm against his windpipe, but Burt did not release this pressure even as he felt relief from the cutting edge of the knife. He held his weight this way, against Mitch's throat, while his other hand groped for Mitch's knife-wrist, finding instead the blade, which cut his hand, but shifting instantly upward to the wrist, and holding there. There was less strength in Burt's left arm than in Mitch's right, and it was all he could do to hold the knife away from him.

Yet he did this, straining his weary and sweating body to its utmost, and gradually, slowly, he felt Mitch weaken from lack of air. Convulsively, Burt twisted his adversary's knife hand, and thought he felt the knife loosen and slip into the dust.

Mitch, fighting for his breath and his life, made a last, spasmodic effort to free himself, bringing both hands upward to force their strength against Burt's choking weight.

His right clawed against Burt, free of the deadly knife, and with this worry suddenly gone, Burt was able to put his full attention, his full strength to depriving the weakened Mitch of air.

Mitch's struggles grew weaker. His face turned dark, and huge veins stood out darkly purple against the deep red of his face. White appeared about his mouth and nostrils, which were pinched and thin as they sucked vainly at the tepid air.

Suddenly Mitch's body went slack and loose, yet Burt did not release his hold, fearing another of Mitch's deadly tricks and caught up with a hitherto unsuspected animalistic savagery.

It was hands from above that pulled him away, rough and urgent hands, and voices that cried with quick fear, "Hell, kid, don't kill him!"

Burt released Mitch, allowed himself to be pulled erect. Reaction came. He thought his knees would not support him, and he trembled violently. A man, kneeling over Mitch, rose up, saying, "He's breathing now. He'll be all right."

Burt found himself leaning heavily against Pete Guiry, who pushed the bottle into his hand and said, "One drink left. You need it worse than me." Burt tilted it up, still gasping for air. The fiery stuff choked him, but it went down.

His leg was warm and wet, and Pete Guiry said, "He opened you up like a sack of wheat. Come on, we'll find the doc. Can you walk?"

Burt took an experimental step, then nodded. He let Pete lead him through the awed and shocked crowd of men into the soft and anonymous dark outside the circle.

It was painful to walk—it was painful to think, because he knew he had settled nothing tonight. All he had done was to plant determination in Mitch Riorson—determination to kill.

V

Last Request

OLD DOC BRADY took nine wide-spaced stitches in the gaping thigh wound, and vound bandage about Burt's leg afterward,

saying, "You'll have a nice white scar there as long as you live. You better stay out of trouble with that Riorson outfit kid, or next time it might not be so easy for me to patch you up."

Sweating and pale, Burt resented the advice, even as he admitted its wisdom. How could he stay out of these fights with Mitch? By ignoring Mitch's taunting slurs? That would keep him out of nothing, for Mitch would simply sharpen the goad, and if even this failed, would carry the fight to Burt himself. There was no avoiding a fight which someone forced upon you, avoidance only convinced your antagonist that you were afraid.

Burt shrugged weakly, saying, "Pete, will you go fetch Lucy and the buckboard I hired to take her home? I think I can drive all right, but I'm darned if I feel like walking."

"Sure, Burt." He hesitated at the door for a moment, finally voicing his thought reluctantly, "You showed him you could whip his fists and his knife. He'll try his gun on you next."

Burt shrugged, and Pete went off into the darkness. Doc Brady murmured softly. "The sheriff being over in the County Seat at Monroe doesn't help any. Mustang ought to have a marshal. It's not good for a town when its law is forty miles away."

Doc was not a big man. He was no larger, no heavier than Burt. He had a dry and caustic wit, yet behind those sharp eyes with their faintly cynical expression was considerable wisdom and a world of kindness. The kids, growing up in Mustang, called him Old Brady. Yet "Old" Doc was not yet forty. Doc had seen much of human frailty, and out of his experience came a vast tolerance for it, even unsurpassed by Mustang's kindly minister.

He asked now, "How's your mother, Burt? It has been too long since I've seen her."

Burt was aware that Doc Brady could not have missed the talk that went around. A doctor heard things as soon as anyone. He said, "She's all right."

Something must have sounded in his voice, some unconcealed resentment, for Doc said, "Don't be too hard on her, son. Your father's death was a terrible shock for her. They were that close. Do not believe the things that are said of her. Folks in a small community live by a pattern, and when someone does not follow the pattern—" Doc Brady hesitated, considered a moment, then said, "Your mother has nothing to do with your fights with Mitch Riorson. It is only the excuse he uses. There's more behind it—take my word for it—some buried antagonism. Somewhere along the line you must have done something, something you may have forgotten entirely, to earn Mitch's animosity."

Burt considered this briefly, but the pain in his leg throbbed steadily and without letup, and made thinking impossible. Pain such as this had its way of turning him nervous and irritable. He said, "Doc, thanks. Hiring the rig to take Lucy home took all the money I had. I'll be in to see you Saturday."

Doc shrugged. "Any time."

Burt got up, testing his weight against the leg experimentally. He winced. Pete Guiry's feet pounded on the steps, taking them two at a time. He burst into the room. "Burt, I got Lucy outside. Make it quick, will you. I could hear Mitch yellin' for her as I drove away. You don't want to tangle with him again tonight. You ought to get out of town ahead of him so's—" Guiry stopped, then went on, staring at Doc defiantly, "Well, he's got a gun."

Burt hobbled to the door, then stiffened his back and walked down the stairs, with Pete Guiry following worriedly.

Lucy was a still and stiff-backed shape on the buckboard seat, her face white and unsmiling. Tears glistened in her eyes as Burt climbed painfully up beside her. Upstreet, toward the schoolhouse, Mitch Riorson's bellow was muffed and indistinct. Pete Guiry handed up the reins, saying, "You go on. Hurry. I'll keep him here fifteen minutes if I have to fight him myself."

Burt nodded, slapped the backs of the team with his reins, and whirled up the valley road toward Clevis Cross. He wished suddenly that he'd had the sense to bring a gun, and because he could not admit, even

to himself, that he was running away, kept the horses at a slow trot in spite of Lucy's urging.

He knew there was apology in Lucy, knew there was pride as well. Like two strangers they covered the entire distance to Clevis Cross, with only polite, brief comments to break the silence.

Lucy got down wtih her faint, "Thank you, Burt," hesitated and seemed about to say something more. Then, leaving it unsaid, she turned and ran toward the house. Burt could never be sure, but he thought he heard Lucy crying just before the big door slammed.

FOR a while after Lucy left in the buckboard with Mitch, John Cross sat in his big, leather-covered chair before the fireplace, his face angry and darkly brooding. Finally, remembering his wife, bedridden and waiting for her supper upstairs, he went into the kitchen, carved a couple of slices from the beef roast, warmed up the gravy and made up a plate of supper. Carrying this he went carefully up the dark stairs. At her door he knocked gently, and when she bid him enter, opened it and went into her room.

The room was in darkness, but long familiarity told John Cross where each piece of furniture was. He set the tray on the dresser, wiped a match alight on the underside of a half-open drawer and lighted the lamp. Turning toward the bed, he found Faith flushed, her eyes holding that peculiar fever brightness.

He watched Faith compassionately. Gone now was the lovely coloring of the girl he had wed, and with whom he had shared the first joys and sorrows of his manhood. He was left with only the memory of her loveliness, and his helpless sorrow for her suffering.

She turned on her side to cough, then smiled apologetically at John as he set the tray before her. "It looks very good, dear. But I am afraid I'll disappoint you. I haven't much appetite lately."

"You need to eat," John's voice was gruff.

"I'll try."

She toyed with the food, obviously preoccupied with her thoughts. John watched her covertly, worriedly. Finally she murmured, "John, go over tomorrow and see Stella for me."

"Why?"

Her added color puzzled him, as did her unaccustomed hesitance. "Well, I would like to go myself, but I'm afraid I'll not be able. I would not like Stella to think we had forgotten her." She pushed a piece of meat idly through the gravy on her plate, raised it and laid it back listlessly. She would not meet John's eyes.

He said, "You are thinking of something else. There is some other reason. . . ."

Faith raised her glance. Suddenly there was fear in them, stark and frantic terror, hidden almost instantly behind her forced but gentle smile. She whispered, "Go see her tomorrow. Please, John. For me?"

His hand went out compassionately, brown and strong, to close over her frail and blue-veined one lying so listlessly beside her tray. The terror in Faith's eyes had its revelation for John Cross. Faith now knew the end was near. He fathomed suddenly the reason behind her request that he call on Stella Norden. Stella had been Faith's closest friend and the one, who as the end drew near, Faith hoped might be the woman with whom John might resume the life that had been interrupted by her own long illness.

Divining this, John Cross felt a burning in his eyes and throat. He said hoarsely, "Sure I'll see her, Faith. I'll do it tomorrow."

He took the tray from the bed and carried it to the dresser. He returned to place a gentle kiss on Faith's dry forehead, feeling as he did the burning fever that was in her. Her eyelids drooped. Still smiling, she dropped into a deep sleep even as John Cross watched.

Slowly shaking his head, he blew out the lamp, picked up the tray and returned downstairs, yet the tightness returned to his throat every time his thoughts returned to Faith and her piteous request. He was a big man who tackled his problems in a direct and roughshod way. But now he was faced with a problem which required a different method of approach, and John Cross was not sure he could manage it.

VI

Caught Red Handed

THIS morning, Sunday, again there was evidence of carousing in the Norden house. Burt arose at five, passed with an involuntary shudder through the parlor which reeked of spilled whisky, and went out into the crisp and dewy dawn. As soon as the chores were done, he hitched the team to the hired buckboard and climbed up onto the seat for the drive to town. His saddle horse trailed behind, tied to the rear of the buckboard by his reins.

This morning the full weight of pain was in his thigh, and had spread upward and downward until it encompassed nearly his entire side and leg. The stitches pulled with little stabs of pain whenever he moved, adding their small irritation to the larger ache of the wound. The bandage turned freshly red from his morning's exertion, and despite the sharp air, he grew warm and began to sweat.

At seven he delivered the team and buckboard to Jed Priest, who eyed his limping friend and said drily, "Kid, don't head into a killin' fight with nothing but your fists. You ain't going to put out a burning barn with a bucketful of water."

Contrarily, the words, so opposite in meaning to those once spoken by his father, had the effect of reminding him of his father's words. "Guns were made for killing—mostly for killing men. To carry one advertises the fact that you are prepared to kill," and, "Mostly, having no gun will keep you out of trouble."

Now, greater even than his fear of Mitch, and of Mitch's vengeance, was Burt's fear that if he packed a gun, temper, or helplessness, or pure hate would make him use it. Then there would be further disgrace for the name of Norden, disgrace unmerited by a father who had carried the name so proudly.

Shrugging impatiently, Burt swung to the gray's back, his leg throbbing painfully and cantered from the town. Sight of Mrs. Gundersen on the store's narrow porch reminded him of the strays, of his promise to hunt them. He owed Gundersens nothing, save for a little money as did all the folks in this country, money which would be paid at the end of the season when the cattle had been sold. Yet even this set up its obligation. His thoughts puzzled at this sense of obligation for a while and finally came to the realization that all of a man's relations with others have a way of setting up obligations, however trivial. No one lives entirely alone, for every man, no matter how lonely a life he leads, is dependent to some degree upon the efforts and toiling of others, and for this dependence finds that he owes them something, something that mere money can never repay.

Burt's expression lightened as he mentally explored the ramifications of this newly discovered line of thinking. Miles dropped behind him and before ten he rode again into the Norden meadow, traversed by its clear and bubbling stream, green with new growth of grass, rising from the stubble of recently-cut hay.

Stella would not look at him, but she had the house spotless, and when he came in, she cut a piece of still-hot apple pie for him and poured him a glass of milk. He ate the pie and drank the milk slowly, thinking all the while of the things he would like to say, thinking he would like to ask her to tell Sam Shirer to stay the hell away.

AT THE last he was fully aware that he could never reproach his mother, nor could he make any open attempt at taking the reins of her life from her own hands. Whatever he did, it could never be through her that he did it. If Sam Shirer was to be kept away, then it would have to be a thing between Sam Shirer and Burt himself. I'll tell him, he thought hopelessly. But it won't do any good.

John Cross came riding into the meadow, and hailed the house from a hundred yards away.

Stella was suddenly younger, suddenly flustered. "Talk to him," she said in a light, soft voice. "I can't have him see me this this way. I'll change."

Pride was left in Stella. In happier days there had been close friendship, much travel back and forth between Norden's N Bar and Clevis Cross. With Faith's sickness and Nick's death this closeness had passed. But the sight of John Cross could bring back its poignant pleasantness to Stella, could make her remember her pride in good, fine things and make her want to preserve it untarnished by change. Hope stirred in Burt as he went outside to talk to big John Cross.

It occured to Burt that John Cross's eyes saw too much, but his words gave nothing away. "Your mother here, son? Faith has been wanting to call for some time, but she's ailing and asked me . . . ." His words trailed off as he noted Burt's limp. He said, "Lucy told me to give you her thanks for bringing her safely home last night."

Burt felt himself flushing. He said, "Ma's getting dressed." It occurred to him that this sounded as though Stella were just getting up, and he felt a need to explain further. "She's been cleaning, and wearing an old dress. She didn't want you to see . . . . . " He felt himself deeper into the quicksands of confusion.

There seemed to be equal confusion in big John Cross as Stella came to the door wearing the bright-flowered, full-skirted dress that Burt loved so well and which had been so long put away. His hat came off his head, leaving behind the mark of its pressure on his damp-packed hair. Even Burt could see how hard John Cross tried at picking up threads of unruffled friendship, could see also how John Cross failed.

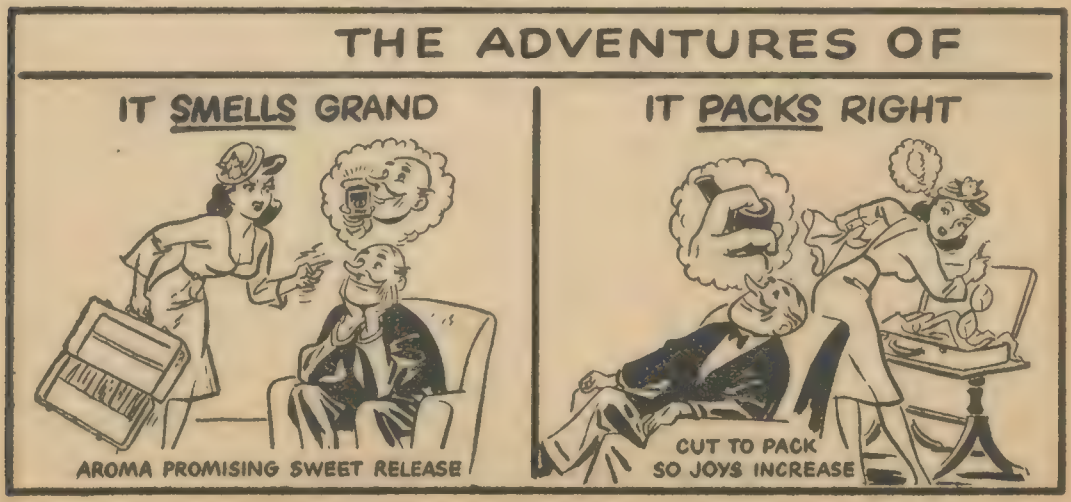
Stella murmured, "Come in, John. How is Faith? I have been meaning to call."

John Cross went into the door as Stella stepped aside. Burt hesitated for a moment, hearing the low murmur of their voices in the parlor, then, shrugging, he mounted the gray and took the winding road out of the meadow and up toward the headwaters of the Bear. A mile from the house, where the land dipped, he left the road, taking a narrow trail through the woods.

Here timber grew so thick and so heavy that the ground rarely felt the heat of the sun. There was no grass, no underbrush save for the struggling small spruces seeded from the larger ones. In spring and early summer, snow lay hardpacked and deep here long after grass had sprouted in other areas.

THIS was an area of perpetual half darkness, the deep and brooding shadow of primeval forest. This was an area untouched since the beginning of time, where the giant spruces seeded and grew, matured and died, and rotted where they fell. Impenetrable, heavy with the smell of resin, of rotted mulch underfoot two feet thick, the place had an unpleasant, depressing effect upon Burt.

He hurried because of it, and in this way covered the distance from bottom to top, something over five miles, in less than an hour. He came out upon the chill bareness



of Timberline Ridge in late morning, and paused to rest his horse.

NOW, with an excellent view of the country for miles, he considered it for a possible outlet. Timberline Ridge, bare and windswept at its top, marched off to the north for a full twenty-five miles before it began to bend to embrace the headwaters of the Bear on the right, the beginnings of Clear Creek on the left, Clear Creek which wound southward through first Riorson's Rocking R, then Clevis Cross. Up there in haze-shrouded distance, it continued this bend to the leftward, like a gigantic horseshoe, to enclose completely the valley of Clear Creek.

On both sides, roughly opposite to the tiny, distance-dwarfed buildings of Clevis Cross, Timberline Ridge began to fall, sharply, until on the one side it embraced into its timbered anonymity the road between N Bar and Clevis Cross, and on the other, farther side, the Pass, which led with sinuous, twisting indirectness to the silver camps on the far slopes of the Continental Divide.

All of the trails, numbering less than half a dozen in all, and the two roads, were effectively fenced by timber, and by the timber's impenetrable wall of deadfalls. An impossible thing, thought Burt, for a man to drive cattle from this valley ahead without leaving the plain tracks of his passing. Yet it was being done. Every day and every week.

As was the case in the valley of the Bear where the Norden's outfit lay and the town of Mustang, this valley of Clear Creek was also marred and pitted with mine dumps and the pockmarks of prospect holes. A road led from its upper reaches, winding downcountry across the vast grassy bottom like a tiny, gray-brown thread. The creek followed effortlessly the lowest ground, spreading here and there into beaver ponds that glistened blue and silver in the late morning sunlight.

Burt nudged his horse, and the animal moved across the mile-wide bare and rolling ridgetop, and dropped then into thinning, clearing-dotted timber for the descent. A band of elk raised their massive heads to stare as Burt passed, then moved with unhurried and stately grace into the protective screen of spruce.

Burt has searched the country ceaselessly and thoroughly all this time with his narrowed eyes, and was therefore surprised when he saw the two riders on the far side of the valley. He immediately thought of Mitch Riorson, and of Jed Priest's cautious admonition, "Don't ever let 'em rig you into a fight where there ain't other people around to see you get a fair shake."

Recalling this, he immediately reined his horse into the trees, descending through them, mentally marking the place where he had last seen Mitch and his brother. He glimpsed them twice, leisurely riding downcountry, and at last, having satisfied himself

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.

It costs no more to get the best!

that they were far enough away to make discovery of himself extremely unlikely, he broke into the open and trotted his horse across the valley floor.

All of the cattle in this valley watered in Clear Creek, and as he crossed it he encountered a bunch of perhaps thirty nooning in the shade of the willows. It is a cattleman's unconscious habit to read the brands on everything he sees. Burt did this, circling through the bunch, and finally, satisfied that there were none of his, went on toward the stand of timber.

Just inside the timber fringe on the far side of the valley, he cut Mitch's fresh trail, and curiously turned along it upcountry. His intent today was riding, and one direction, one trail was as good as any other.

This trail rose gradually, and when Mitch's horse's tracks left the trail, Burt left it too. After a stiff climb of nearly a mile, he reached the foot of a gray and rocky mine dump, completely losing the prints he had been following in the rocks and gravel. He stopped, shrugged, and was about to turn back when he heard the branch snap behind him.

He whirled, startled. Below him, not fifty feet away, Mitch Riorson sat his horse. Cradled loosely in his arms, Mitch held a rifle. His face was a study of hate—and rage—and something new that was puzzling to Burt—fear. Behind Mitch sat younger Chuck Riorson, also holding a rifle. Wordless, Mitch raised the gun. Chuck edged his horse ten feet to one side, and followed suit. Two rifles were trained on Burt.

Words crowded to Burt's lips, "Wait! You're not going to—"

It came to him with terrifying clarity that Mitch intended to kill him. It was the one impression that registered in his startled brain. Then his horse leaped and shied at the savagery of frantic spurs. A shot made its harsh racket, another, and Burt was into the trees, lying low against his horse's neck, entirely unconscious of the clawing branches that tore at him and sought to unseat him and fling him into the trail. Behind came the sound of pursuit, and Mitch's raging and vicious words, "Don't let him get away!"

VII

Boxed

ODD was the feeling in John Cross, the feeling that the country had done Stella Norden an injustice as he rode back toward Clevis Creek that afternoon. In John Cross was nothing of narrow-mindedness, yet in him as in all men of this country, there were strong feelings as to what a woman's conduct should be. Stella violated those standards yet Cross, after this afternoon, could not find it in his heart to condemn her. Instead she had charmed him with her gentle womanliness, she had made him see the side of her the country had forgotten or had not known existed.

In late afternoon he came into the yard at Clevis Cross, and Lucy ran out to meet him, her eyes bright with tears, her face set in a mold of concern. "You had better look at Mother, Dad. I sent Dorian for the doctor. She's weaker. Her voice is only a whisper now." The girl buried her face in his rough shirt. "Dad, I'm scared."

His comforting of Lucy was brief, and then he raced up the stairs to Faith's room, with Lucy close behind him. At her door he stopped, composing himself, but filled with the same terror of loss that Lucy was experiencing. When he went in he saw immediately that his daughter had not exaggerated her mother's condition. Faith lay thin and motionless beneath the single sheet, her skin white and transparent, her eyes closed. At his entry she opened them and smiled faintly. Her voice was a barely audible murmur, "John, take my hand."

He knelt beside the bed, taking her two emaciated hands within his own strong, brown ones. "The doctor's coming. You will be all right."

The shake of her head was hardly noticeable. "Not this time, John. Not this time. There is nothing a doctor can do for me now."

He moved as if to rise. "I'll get you some broth." But sudden strength came to her hands as she held him there. Fright was in

her voice, fright that was a child's fear of the unknown.

"We should not have to make this journey alone, John."

Nick Norden had been murdered for the knowledge he possessed

"You are making no journey." Emotion was hoarseness in his voice, dryness of his throat, a stinging behind his eyes. He could see now, looking for it, how Faith had weakened and slipped in these last thirty days. Seeing her every day, the change had been so gradual that it now came to him with a shock as he comprehended the full extent of her failing and the inevitable result.

"John, let's not fool ourselves." She smiled to take the sting from this, squeezed his hand to silence his protest. Her voice grew even weaker as she said, "Stella Norden is lonely. You will be lonely, and Lucy will need a good woman's care. Will you be nice to Stella, John? Will you promise me you'll try?"

At this moment, thought of another woman was abomination to John Cross. The empty, soothing agreement with Faith's whim came automatically to his lips, but he stopped it there, seeing at last the terrible urgency that was in her eyes, the pleading. "Why, she wants this more than anything else in the world," was his thought.

His thoughts silenced him, and the moments dragged. Weak was the pressure of Faith's grasp, ever weaker. Yet her will forced the demand, "Promise, John?"

"If that is what you want, then I will promise. Perhaps Stella will not have me, but I will do my best. But not right away, Faith. Not right away."

"All right, John." A light smile lifted the corners of her mouth, the mouth that was still sweet. Her breathing slowed and stopped and her heart was still. Suddenly John Cross, big John Cross buried his face against her breast and wept, the sound of it terrible and lost in the utter quiet of the house at Clevis Cross . . . .

BURT NORDEN had abandoned his horse, had with his quirt sent it crashing downhill through the timber while he, himself, paralleled the slope on soundless feet. This action gave him ten minutes, but it also deprived him of his mobility.

Now, swiftly running downcountry through the timber, softfooted on the rotted mulch of pine needles, he knew the panic, the sheer terror of a hunted animal. Below the mine dump where Mitch had caught him, he cut a trail, plain pounded by the hooves of cattle and horses, and paused here momentarily to still his gusty breathing.

Below him he could hear the thrashing of Mitch and Chuck Riorson, and then the enraged bellow of Mitch as he found Burt's

riderless horse. They would be returning now, returning to seek him out.

Puzzlement stirred in Burt as he crouched in a heavy tangle of down timber. Why was Mitch so suddenly determined to kill? It stretched even Burt's active imagination to believe this was the outcome of last night's fight. Yet what did he know of the things defeat and humiliation could breed in a mind as twisted and vicious as Mitch Riorson's?

Horseback, they could not pursue into this jungle of deadfalls. He waited until their crashing passage had faded with distance, then rose and made his precarious, inching way a quarter of a mile farther. He could hear them above him, paralleling his own course. Abruptly he came upon a clearing, long and narrow, that reached its scarlike bareness clear to the bareness of Timberline Ridge, far above.

Halted at its edge, fearing to emerge into openness, he heard Mitch's voice as a hoarse whisper from higher on the slope. "He's got to cross that clearing, or he's got to go back. Take your horse and swing back. A mile or so beyond the mine the timber thins out and it's nothing but scrub brush for a quarter mile. Find yourself a spot and watch that brush so he don't try to get away upcountry. I'll sit here with the rifle and wait until he comes out."

Burt frowned. With Mitch watching this clearing, Chuck the brush farther north, they had him neatly boxed on two sides, which left him two poorer alternatives. Uphill at least for a mile, having to pass Mitch on the way, or downhill, where he would be exposed entirely while he crossed the grassy valley floor. Afoot, he would be slow and clumsy, easily overtaken by the Riorsons with their horses.

Chuck had led Burt's own horse away from here, and, Burt thought, would undoubtedly tie him somewhere near to the place where he took up his vigil, in plain sight, for Chuck was no more of a fool than Mitch. Recovering his own horse was, then, out of the question.

Driving through his trapped feeling, his growing fear, came a strange recognition of this particular place. Straight downhill across this bare slash of clearing, and almost to the bottom, stood a huge, round boulder, a full ten feet high. For a couple of minutes Burt stared at the boulder, preoccupied with his own trouble, with this preoccupation slowing recognition in him.

When it came, it came with a rush. Down there, on the downhill side of that boulder, he had found his father's body, riddled and stiff and crusted with dried blood. The boulder looked oddly different from above, and perhaps this had slowed the remembrance in Burt.

A connection troubled him, the apparent coincidence of being beset himself at the same approximate spot in which his father had met death. "I wonder if the Riorsons killed him," was his instant thought, which he rejected as the succeeding question occurred, "But why? He never had any trouble with them."

Eventually the urgency of his own trouble drove thought of his father from his mind, and he gave consideration to extricating himself from the jaws of this loose-sprung trap.

DOWNHILL, and across the valley, was out of the question, he decided. A run across the scar of clearing was equally impossible. Which left him but one alternative —uphill, straight past the watchful and armed figure of Mitch.

His decision made for him by circumstances, he no longer troubled himself with doubt. Stooping, he slipped off his boots. With his knife he cut a thong of leather from his belt, and with it slung the boots around his neck. Then, taking infinite care with the placing of his feet in the dead tangle of timber and brush, he commenced the slow and tortuous climb.

Half an hour passed—an hour. Burt calculated he had gone less than a quarter mile, but he could congratulate himself, for he had made no noise, however small. His breathing was shallow and fast, but quiet. Tenseness rode him. He would go ten or fifteen steps, then stop to watch and to listen. It was during one of these stops that he heard Mitch Riorson's restless stirring not two hundred yards away. The light and pleasant aroma of tobacco smoke drifted to him. After another five careful paces he came upon a

trail, twisting and open, and down it glimpsed a flash of Mitch Riorson's blue shirt.

He froze. Movement stirred the shirt, and Burt thought, "If I only had me a rifle!"

Caution told him, "Wait." This he ignored, driven by the rising impatience, the growing anger that was in him. He started up, only to settle back, appalled at the rashness that had almost controlled him. "I wouldn't get closer than fifty yards to him. Then he'd get me."

He turned and squatted carefully, taking a position which would not tire him, nor cramp his legs. A deer fly buzzed idly and settled on his bare hand. Burt carefully brushed it away. Along the trail Mitch Riorson cursed softly and steadily.

Chuck's voice brought its worried cadences along the trail from the distant, brushy slide. "You see him at all, Mitch? You heard him?"

And Mitch called, "Naw. But stay put. He can't get away."

The sun floated hotly downward toward the high-ridged bowl, and at last tipped its flaming edge below it. With its movement now visible it sank steadily from sight. Immediately the rare air turned cool, and shadow settled itself in the timber.

Chuck Riorson's voice came again. "Mitch, he'll get away in the dark. What do we do now?"

"Hell, he's afoot, ain't he? Quit worrying. We'll pick him up."

Burt waited, and as the light faded from the sky, heard Chuck come along the trail, pulling Burt's own gray behind. They passed him a scant ten feet away.

As the gray went by, Burt came noiselessly to his feet and stepped into the trail. Running, he caught at the gray's reins with an out-flung hand, yanking viciously the instant his grasp felt leather. The gray half reared, adding his own strength to the pull against the reins-ends in Chuck's hand.

They came free, and with ease and speed born of long familiarity, Burt separated them and swung to the gray's back, at the same time turning him in a tight circle. Chuck's voice told him that Chuck still remained unaware of what was happening, for Chuck cursed the gray in a voice that held no alarm, only an ill-tempered uneasiness.

A bend in the trail, and the half-light of dusk combined to aid Burt unexpectedly, as did his crouching position on the gray's back, and the dark clothes he wore. Chuck howled, "Somethin' spooked that damned gray! He got away from me!"

"Well get him! Get him! If you don't Burt Norden will!"

VIII
Escape

BURT, crouching still against the gray's neck, pounded along the trail at a run. Behind him, growing faint as distance increased, he could hear the hooves of Chuck's horse, and farther still, Mitch Riorson's ragged shouting.

He came to a fork in the trail, seeing this dimly, and unhesitatingly took the lower fork. He had no appetite for further skulking in the timber high on the ridge, wanting only to reach the unhampering freedom of open grass, where he could run downcountry along the road for the sanctuary of Clevis Cross.

He came to another fork in the trail just above the bare outline of the mine dump where Mitch and Chuck had surprised him, and again he took the lower trail, here making his mistake. For the lower trail led only into the mine workings, the upper circling above and then plunging into the plain.

The gray galloped along this trail, for two hundred yards, then bringing himself up short, sliding in the rubble, before a towering frame structure. Below this the mine dump stretched away for a full quarter-mile downhill, crested with the tracks of the narrow-gauge mine railway. A couple of rusty mine cars made their sagging dim shapes against the lighter color of the rock dump.

Burt breathed, "Damn it," sawing the gray's head around and pointing him back uptrail. He had gone but a scant fifty yards when he heard the pound of Chuck as the younger of the two Riorsons came thunder-

ing along. He heard Chuck stop at the fork, saw the flare of a match as Chuck dismounted to search the trail for the gray's tracks.

"He still don't know I've got the horse," he thought, but turned back, knowing that Chuck would find the gray's tracks and would take this lower trail. He was neatly boxed, and knew it. A stand beside the trail, hand covering his horse's nostrils, might keep Chuck's notice from him until Chuck had passed. But to bolt back up the trail would put him directly into Mitch's path, for Mitch could be no more than a hundred yards behind Chuck.

Desperation touched him; panic ran its brief course through him. Yet it was not his nature to give up. With the gray again pointed at the mine, he searched the ground for tracks, for the sign of a continuation of this trail. There was too much dark for tracks, yet he did see the pale path that swung around the mine building, and took it, well aware that he could never be worse off than he now was.

The horse grew spooky as the trail dipped sharply across the edge of the dump, and placed his feet cautiously in the loose rubble. Then suddenly Burt could see ahead of him a trail that was dark with horse and cattle droppings, plain and smooth from much usage.

Puzzled, he halted. This trail but touched the one he was on briefly before it continued its own upward way. Staring, straining his eyes in the near darkness, Burt followed its devious path with his glance. In wide and easy-graded loops it coursed upward, to end apparently in the black, yawning mouth of the mine tunnel.

He shrugged, much relieved, and reined his horse downward toward this path, spurring instantly as the horse came into it and feeling the lift in his spirits as the distance flowed swiftly behind.

Relief was solid and tangible in Burt, something that took strength from him, made him feel his overpowering weariness, the renewed pain of the wound in his thigh. Yet in the back of his consciousness a vague knowledge persisted, a fleeting, unrecognized awareness that would not take shape. He had gazed upon the outlet from this valley, upon the rustler's run and did not know that he had. He had seen the thing his father had seen, and because he had, his life was forfeit.

He had seen the rustler's run and sometime he would know what he had seen. But not tonight. For the terror of being hunted game was still with him and his only thought was to get away.

DORIAN brought Doc Brady to Clevis Cross, and then, at John Cross's quiet suggestion, went to fetch Stella Norden.

Lucy crouched in a big, leather-covered chair in the corner, head down upon her arms, sobbing softly and without cessation. John Cross stared into the leaping fire, his eyes bitter and blank. Doc Brady stood with his back to the fire, rubbing the hands that were clasped together behind him against each other, in a gesture that was purely automatic. He said, "John, at a time like this I hate being a doctor. I don't know enough to be a doctor. No man does. If we did, I might have saved her. Some day doctors will be able to save cases like hers."

John Cross murmured wearily, "Doc, it isn't your fault. Stop blaming yourself." He scowled. "I was thinking of Stella Norden. If she felt like I feel, then I can understand a lot of things I never understood before. There is something gone out of me. It is as though my heart were cut out and nothing left in its place. Maybe it would be easy to believe that whisky could fill that hollow."

Doc murmured, "I never blamed Stella. But you can't let down like that, John. Life goes on. It's got to go on. You are not the first who has lost a loved one. You will not be the last. You can never replace Faith, but you've got to try as much for her sake and Lucy's as your own."

Cross shook his head, never lifting his eyes from the fire, and Doc did not protest. This was not the time. There is a time for grieving and a time to stop grieving, as Doc well knew. He said, "You don't need me here. I'll come back tomorrow and help you bring her to town."

He picked up his hat from the table, touched John Cross's shoulder as he went

by. He stopped before the forlorn figure of Lucy for a moment, looking down. Then, shrugging at his helplessness, he walked across the room to the door.

His buggy horse was tied to the porch rail by a short length of rope. He untied this and climbed to the seat, taking up the reins. As he went up the steep road into the timber, he passed Dorian's buckboard and could see the woman-shape of Stella Norden beside the foreman. Doc Brady smiled a little as he acknowledged Dorian's shout and upraised hand. Nothing like someone else's troubles to take your mind from your own. Stella would discover this in the days to come.

UPON entering the house, Stella's eyes went immediately to John Cross, bitter-eyed and brooding before the fire. Compassion instantly softened her expression, saddened her eyes.

A soft sobbing on the far side of the room claimed her attention, and, seeing Lucy, there was no hesitation in her. Immediately she crossed the room and sank to her knees on the floor before the girl. Like a child, Lucy came forward against her, burying her tear-stained face against Stella's welcome feminine softness. For a long moment Stella comforted her, finally rising to her feet and pulling Lucy up with her.

She spoke in a brisk, near-whisper. "There. Come into the kitchen with me while I fix you and your father something to eat."

Cross turned his head, saying, "Nothing for me, Stell."

"Hush! You'll eat if I have to feed you myself."

Her words drew a faint smile from Lucy, a smile that was vastly encouraging to Stella. The girl said, "You needn't have gone to all the trouble of. . . . . ."

"Trouble? Why girl, this is no trouble. You need me, don't you?"

Perhaps, she thought, this was the thing which had been lacking in her own life. Perhaps she was a woman who required the need of others, something beyond the casual and undemanding need of an eighteen-year-old boy.

The smell of coffee filled the kitchen, wafting through into the big front room. It brought John Cross out into the kitchen, stifling his grief for the sake of manners. And in a little while they made a compact and friendly group, drawn closer tonight by the trouble that had come, unbidden, to point up their need for one another.

AT NINE, Burt came pounding into the yard at Clevis Cross with the heavy weariness of this long afternoon of terror upon him. Dorian intercepted him, gave him a hand down from his saddle and took the reins of his horse.

Burt said hoarsely, "They're after me! Mitch and Chuck Riorson—with rifles. They tried to kill me."

"Why son, I doubt that. They're mean, but they're not fools. Mebbe they just wanted you to think they were tryin' to kill you."

Helpless impatience stirred in Burt. "They tried. I tell you—they shot at me."

"Why? Why would they want to kill you? Because of that fight at the dance last night?" Dorian shook his head in the darkness, a gesture felt rather than seen.

Burt's shoulders slumped. His own conviction had not lessened, but he could see the futility of trying to convince this man, of trying to convince John Cross. Within his own mind had been amazement as he had realized Mitch meant to kill him, for he had not yet fathomed the reason. He said wearily, "Give me the reins. I've got to get home."

"No need for that. Mrs. Cross died tonight. Your mother's here."

Shock and surprise—and youth's awe in the face of death held Burt silent for a moment. Then he said, "The chores. The cow's got to be milked, the rest of the stuff fed . . . . ."

"I did that for you when I went after your ma. I'll put your horse away." He moved off into the darkness toward the corral, leading Burt's lathered and weary gray. But watched his shape lose identity in the shroud of night, then turned reluctantly toward the house.

He would not mention either Mitch or Chuck. He had made a fool of himself in Dorian's eyes. A scared kid— that was what Dorian thought him. He would not have Lucy thinking that—or John Cross either.

For tonight he was safe. Tomorrow . . .

He went into the kitchen, into the warm and fragrant room where only yesterday he had quarreled with Lucy. He felt clumsy and awkward. He looked at John Cross, then shifted his glance to his mother, still avoiding Lucy's eyes. Stella Norden said, "Where have you been? You look awful. What's the matter with your leg?"

"Hurt it. I been riding." He pulled his glance around, forced it to rest upon Lucy. Her paleness shocked him, stirred his love, awoke his compassion. He said clumsily, "Lucy, I'm sorry."

Tears brightened her eyes. Stella forestalled her new outburst by saying, "There. Enough of that. It is time you were in bed, Lucy. Tomorrow is another day."

She led Lucy from the kitchen, and Burt could hear them climbing the stairs. John Cross said, "You can sleep in the ranch office, son," and led the way, opening the door onto the tiny cubbyhole where papers and spurs, chaps and old hats and boots made their comfortably untidy litter. Burt removed his boots, and when John Cross had closed the door behind him, lay down, fully dressed upon the leather-covered settee.

The riddle of Mitch's ill-concealed murderous intent puzzled him as did this disturbing conviction that he held the answer in his head—if only he could find it.

Still puzzled, still troubled, at last he fell asleep . . . .

IX

Tunnel Target

AT FOUR, the eastern sky was a gray line, bringing into ghostly silhouette the tall ragged line of spruces on the ridgetop. The hillsides still clung to their mantle of darkness, but down in the valley and in the yard at Clevis Cross, objects began to take shape, dimly at first, but with rapidly increasing clarity.

This faint light woke Burt at once. Unmoving, he lay still for a moment, staring about him at the dim and unrecognized clutter of John Cross's office.

It had been a night of flight for Burt. Dreams and nightmares had thrice awakened him, bathed with sweat and shaking from head to foot. Now, suddenly, he knew where he was, knew that Faith Cross was dead, and that Mitch and Chuck Riorson were determined to kill him.

Still dazed from sudden awakening, his mind was mostly relaxed, and in this relaxed state came suddenly upon the thing which had so effectively eluded him last night. The trail. The trail he had taken from the mine—the one which led upward to disappear into the mine tunnel.

It was still a puzzle, for how could men rustle cattle by driving them into a mine tunnel? Yet he could not rid himself of the conviction that somewhere in that old abandoned mine tunnel lay the answer to the rustling that had plagued the country so long. Also, it was there that the answer to Mitch and Chuck's attempt to murder him the night before would be found. There might lie the solution to Nick Norden's murder, for it was not a quarter mile from the tunnel mouth to the huge boulder which had sheltered Nick's dead body, more than a year ago.

Convulsively, Burt came to his feet. No sound broke the silence of this house as he walked through the big front room to the door, carrying his boots.

Beside the door stood John Cross's carbine, and on the table beside it was a handful of shells.

Burt hesitated, then snatched up the rifle and stuffed the shells into his pocket.

The air outside was chill, and Burt's breath preceded him in great steamy clouds. He could hear a stir of early movement from the bunkhouse, and ran lightly across the yard to the corral. His saddle lay on the top rail beside the gate, his bridle hanging from the horn, and the saddle blanket laid across the top to protect saddle and bridle from rain and dew.

His gray was alone in this corral, and easily caught. Mounted, he went out of the yard, taking the road up the valley, just as Dorian opened the bunkhouse door. He did not know whether Dorian saw him or not,

and did not care. He let the gray, freshened by a night's rest and a good feed of hay and grain, stretch out, but as he approached the Riorsons' place, he left the road and made a big circle to the right, wasting a full hour of time, but succeeding in staying entirely out of sight of the house.

The sun came up and warmed his back. The heavy, high-country dew disappeared from the grass, and the timber sent its sharp, resin smell flowing down the slopes, pungently strong and pleasant. Cattle, fat and sleek, roamed the valley in early morning coolness, grazing. As the day's heat increased, they would seek the shade and coolness of the timber.

IT WAS hard for Burt to believe, amid this peaceful beauty, that along this same road he had galloped only last night with death at his heels. Thinking thus, his head swiveled around, now nervously watching the road behind, and all of the goodness of the morning was gone, only fear remained.

Strong was his desire to turn his horse, to sink his spurs, to return to the safety of Clevis Cross. Only stubbornness forced him on and awareness that Mitch would hunt him down, somewhere, sometime. His only salvation lay in discovery of the mine tunnel's secret, so that he could go to John Cross, to old man Guiry, to the others for help.

Yet he could not control the nervous and constant turning of his head, the side-to-side shifting of his eyes. He could not control the fear that made him start at each small noise.

At eight he came to the trail that led upward to the mine, the trail that showed so much plain evidence of travel. And a few moments later he found the reason why it had never been followed and explored. A quarter mile below the mine it forked, the right fork continuing on upcountry, well traveled and plain, the left, for as far as the eye could see having been carefully worked upon to erase the plain signs of usage. A casual rider would notice none of this. Only because Burt remembered the way he had come down last night was he able to detect it.

He turned his horse, and after a hundred yards came to the place where the trail again showed its heavy usage. Feeling excitement, he gigged the horse sharply onward, and shortly came to the yawning mouth of the tunnel.

He hesitated. At that moment he heard a shout behind him, faint across the distance, and the bawl of a cow. Screened by timber, he could see nothing beyond it. But with his hesitation suddenly gone, he reined and spurred his reluctant horse into the suddenly complete darkness and rode along the gently sloping timbered tunnel.

A slight bend blotted out the square of light that was the tunnel mouth, and complete darkness settled upon Burt. Somewhere he could hear water running, splashing against the rocks. There was a damp and dank smell here, but there was another odor as well, the corral smell of manure, the plain smell of horses and cattle.

The path underfoot was beaten and churned by the many hooves that had preceded Burt through here. Perhaps it was this that took the fear and hesitation from the gray, for the animal, his first skittishness abated, went along at a steady, plodding walk, for all the world as though he were patiently plodding down the long road toward Mustang.

Seconds were hours, minutes eternities. After what he judged to be fifteen minutes, Burt heard an odd rumble behind him, a deep murmur of sound. Turned nervous and afraid, he kicked the gray's ribs and the animal broke into a trot. Suddenly the air seemed fresher, warmer, and with no warning whatever, Burt came around a sharp turn and saw ahead of him a square of bright sunlight.

Here he came upon a fork in the tunnel, the right fork continuing blackly into the bowels of the mountain, the left fork, freshly timbered, plainly a recent excavation, taking its two-hundred-yard straight way to the opening. The story was plain now. Somehow old man Riorson, by calculations and explorations, had discovered how close this tunnel came to going straight through the mountain. He and his three boys had finished it out, perhaps no longer ago than two or

three years, timbered it, and begun running cattle through it.

BY PURE accident while hunting strays, Nick Norden had come upon it, had been discovered and murdered for the knowledge he possessed. As simple as this, then, the enigma of vanishing cattle. Once through the mountain, beyond the bare, telltale summit of Timberline Ridge, the cattle were driven to the road that sinuously led to the silver camps on the Continental Divide. At Silver City there was a steady and continuing market for beef.

The Riorsons had been able to control their greed. They had taken only small bunches, and because they had, were able to escape detection completely.

The murmur of sound increased behind Burt, and abruptly he knew it for what it was, the combined bellow of cattle and the shouting of drovers. He came out of the tunnel into bright sunlight, blinking his eyes against the glare.

Regaining his sight, he stared upward toward the summit of Timberline Ridge, towering three thousand feet above him. He half reined his horse around, intending for a moment to ride up over it, but then realization struck him that the journey which had taken him a mere fifteen minutes through the tunnel would take a full three hours over the top.

"If I go that way," he thought, "by the time I can get back to Clevis Cross they'll all be gone to Mustang for the funeral." Burt could realize that proof was important. If he could return to Clevis Cross and bring John Cross here in time to track Riorsons and catch them with the stolen herd, then there would be no wiggling out of it for them.

With his mind suddenly made up, he swung the gray and pointed him straight back into the tunnel, spurring and forcing the animal to a fast trot in the darkness. With his eyes blinded, he nearly missed the forks, going past it and only apprised of its presence by the draft of cold air issuing from the old tunnel.

Before him, the steady plod of cattle hooves, the harrying shouts of the Riorsons, were loud and near. Suddenly frightened and regretful, but with his decision unshaken, Burt reined his horse into the old tunnel and stopped, far enough back to be invisible in the darkness, close enough to see and identify the Riorsons as they went past.

The thunder of plodding and softly lowing cattle increased, reverberating and echoing and multiplying in this confined space. Visible in the faint light from the open tunnel mouth, the leaders went past. Burt counted, one-two-three-four, and reached a count of sixteen by the time the first rider went past. This rider was Chuck Riorson, and immediately behind him was Mitch. Old Dan Riorson brought up the rear. Sim, the youngest, had either been left at the ranch or on guard at the far mouth of the tunnel.

Burt was forced to admire the Riorsons' sagacity. Today they knew there would be no riders, no snoopers in the Clear Creek Valley. Faith Cross was dead, today the day of the funeral.

Dan Riorson's broad back was presented to Burt, diminishing against the light at the tunnel mouth. Burt started a sigh of relief, and then suddenly, horror halted it, horror and a trapped and terrible fear.

SOMETHING must have brought to Burt's gray the scent of the other horses, for at this instant he raised his head and nickered. Before Burt could reach him in the dark, before he could stifle and stop the gray's nostrils with his hand, the horse nickered again.

He caught the animal then, but it was too late. Dan Riorson swung in his saddle, and over the murmur of the cattle came his surprised, "Hey! What the hell? I told Sim to stay at the tunnel mouth."

He gave his orders swiftly and sharply, "Chuck, take 'em on out. Push 'em easy so we can catch up. Mitch, ride back through and see if Sim's still there. Watch yourself. If it ain't Sim—" he broke off—"hell it couldn't be anyone else. Sim would've used his gun before he let anyone into the tunnel. Well, go on! We ain't got all day."

Burt saw Mitch go past the fork in the tunnel and disappear into the darkness of the main shaft. His trapped feeling increased. He fingered the carbine, and absently shoved

shells into its magazine. The end to this was plain and sure. When Mitch returned, old Dan would realize that the nicker could have come from but one place—the old tunnel. Then Burt would be trapped.

Decision steadied his nerves. He raised the carbine, but found that in this darkness, he could not get his sights; Dan's body made an utterly black blob against the dimly reflected light from the tunnel mouth. He therefore sighted against the lightness just beside Dan, and then shifted the gun ever so slightly before he pulled the trigger.

The flash and the roar of the carbine seemed to fill this narrow tunnel. The acrid smoke made a cloud that hid Dan from him entirely for a full half minute. And when it cleared, Dan had gone.

Burt swung to the gray's back and started out. "I've got a chance now," was his thought. "Chuck's at one end, Mitch the other. All I've got to do is take care of Mitch."

But as he came into the light at the tunnel fork, something splatted against the rock wall at his side, showering him with sharp rock splinters. And suddenly he realized with a complete cessation of hope, "I missed him. I missed Dan, and now I'm done for."

X

Rustlers' Showdown

DOC BRADY came out at nine, a casket in the back of the buckboard he drove, with Solly Juhan, the undertaker, in the seat beside him. Doc and Dorian carried the casket into the house, and after a while, Doc, Dorian, John Cross and Juhan carried it back out and placed it in the buckboard.

Doc took up the reins, speaking down at John Cross, "I guess two o'clock will be all right, John. Most folks will be able to get away in the afternoon."

He drove away, his going leaving vast emptiness in John Cross. This was final.

[Turn page]

Faith was gone. Stella Norden stood beside him, her comforting hand on his arm. Lucy, clinging to Stella, wept anew.

With some apparent thought of breaking the tension, Stella asked, "Why, I don't believe I've seen Burt this morning. Where is he?"

Cross grunted, his mind only half on the question, "Haven't seen him either."

Dorian, grizzled and stolid, said, "He rode out at daybreak. Don't guess he saw me. He was packing your carbine, John."

Lucy stopped crying abruptly. Cross felt a touch of uneasiness. Dorian went on, "He come to me with a story of the Riorsons trying to kill him yesterday. I didn't pay much mind, figgered he was imagining things. Still, a carbine . . . ."

Lucy cried, "Dad, Mitch tried to kill him with a knife at the dance!"

Stella's hand tightened on Cross's arm. She asked, "John, did he?"

"He had a knife gash on his leg. Doc sewed it up."

So long was Stella silent, that John Cross turned uneasy. Her face was bitter and ashamed. She murmured, "I've not been much of a mother. I've not been much of a mother for a long time. But that is going to change." She looked suddenly up at him, with tears glistening in her eyes. "John, I hate to ask it at a time like this, but do you suppose . . . ?"

"I could go after him?" He finished for her because she hesitated. "Sure." He turned abruptly to Dorian. "Saddle my sorrel. Get three or four of the boys and come along."

He found himself welcoming the diversion, although he could not think Burt was in any danger. He smiled at Stella, trying to show her some reassurance. She was a worried mother who was no longer thinking of herself and of her own grief. And she was still attractive, thought John Cross.

He calculated the time he had, before he was due at Mustang, and put his horse into a lope, which he varied at intervals by trotting and walking. Dorian rode directly behind him, and strung out behind Dorian rode three Clevis Cross punchers.

He rode openly into Riorson's yard, and hailed the house peremptorily, receiving no answer. Concern mounted within him. He had fully expected to find at least a part of the Riorson family at home, and finding them there would have partially convinced him that Burt was imagining things. Yet to find them all gone . . . .

The puzzle of the rustling recurred in his mind and with it came his own unvoiced suspicion of the Riorsons. There had never been one concrete thing that would tie them in with it, yet his suspicion of them remained.

At the junction of Riorson's lane with the main road, his sharp eyes detected on the hard-packed ground the hoofprints of three or four horses, hard-pressed, as they came from the lane and onto the road.

He made his decision with characteristic suddenness, saying over his shoulder to Dorian, "We'll follow these until we find the Riorsons."

BURT knew that three of them at least. Dan, Mitch and Sim, were out there now. He supposed Chuck was still with the cattle. He could hear them talking in low tones, planning, perhaps, how they would rid themselves of him.

He could distinguish a part of Dan's talk, for the father's voice had a peculiar penetrating timbre, and was pitched higher than either of his sons' voices. He caught the words, "Mitch, remember where we cached that dynamite that was left when we finished the tunnel? Go get it. We'll seal that nosy Norden kid in here."

Stark terror made a clammy chill along Burt's spine. Silence lay in the tunnel then, and some ten minutes later he heard Mitch's scuffling approach and the rumble of his voice. Dan Riorson appeared briefly against the dim light at the forks, and automatically, Burt brought up the carbine and threw a shot at him. Dan cursed, dropped, and crawled to safety.

Mitch's voice raised, "How the hell we goin' to drill the shots with him shootin' at us?"

Another silence, broken by whispers, and finally Dan's voice, heavy with satisfaction. "Gimme a couple of sticks and a piece of fuse. I'll raise so damned much dust in

there he won't be able to see a thing."

Another wait for Burt—an agonizing wait, and again Dan's voice, "Not that much fuss! You want him to toss it back out at us?"

Burt had planned just this, had inched himself forward in the tunnel to wait. Now, he backed again, until he could feel the nervous warmth of the gray beside him. A spark arched into the tunnel. Burt crouched and covered his ears.

The roar was deafening. It filled the tunnel, solid and terrible, and loosened rocks overhead. It lifted dust in a blinding cloud. Even when it was gone the sound of it still rang in Burt's ears, partially hiding the rumble of falling rock. The blast's acrid smoke rolled along the tunnel with the dust, and when it reached Burt, sent him into a coughing spasm that doubled him over, made him gasp for breath. The gray stampeded back into the tunnel, his hoofbeats slowly diminishing, nickering shrilly.

Blindly Burt brought up the carbine, shot, levered and shot again. His bullets richocheted off the rock walls of the tunnel and sang away to end abruptly as they reached the forks.

Mitch yelled, "Hurry! He's shootin' again!"

SUDDENLY Burt was calm. He knew now that there was no way out of this for him. They were too many and they held all the cards. He thought of Nick Norden, and of the things his death had done to Stella. Upon the Riorsons was the blame for all of this—the blame for what was now happening to him. Anger began to crowd out the fear in Burt. That anger built and grew until it consumed him.

The dust was a curtain. If it could hide the Riorsons, it could also hide Burt. He moved toward the forks, rifle held across his chest, and as he moved his leg began to pain again. Yet this only served to increase his anger.

The dust grew thicker and he stifled a cough. He heard the steady clang of hammer against rock drill, seemingly but a few feet from him. He remembered that the carbine was empty, and felt his knees go weak, considering what would have happened had he not thought of this in time. He reloaded, and as he levered a shell into the chamber, cautiously and slowly, the click of the mechanism was plainly audible.

Dan's voice came sharply, "What was that?"

Burt stepped into the clearer air of the forks, saw Dan kneeling, rock drill in one hand, hammer in the other. Mitch was silhouetted in the light from the opening, Sim knelt beside the dynamite box.

Burt said, "Hold it!" never knowing which way to point the gun, loosely holding it before him. A curse rumbled from Dan's heavy lips, and his hand came back, the hand that held the hammer. Burt forced his glance from Dan, saw Mitch clawing out his revolver, saw Sim, the youngest, rising, fisting paper-wrapped sticks of dynamite in both hands.

He barked, "Hold it!" again, but knew nothing could stop this now. He fingered the trigger, forcing the muzzle to bear on Mitch, and found himself thinking, "I wish I knew which of them killed Nick."

The gun bucked against him, only half raised to his shoulder. From a corner of his eye he saw the hammer leave Dan's hand. He had no time for movement, other than a brief head movement, and the short-handled hammer gave his temple a grazing blow, one which had no force to stun, but which took a square inch of skin from his head.

He swung the gun to cover Dan, having no time to look at Mitch, and momentarily

Coming Up in the Next Issue

SONG OF DEATH by H. A. DeROSSO

and many other stories of action and romance

he expected the slam of a bullet, the brief pain and the oblivion that would follow.

Dan's carbine lay a yard from him on the ground, and the man threw his body toward it, missed his first grasp, and clawed frantically. Burt shouted, "Dan, I'll kill you!"

A shot roared; a bullet showered Burt with splinters. Dan would not stop trying, and Burt dropped the gun muzzle and fired. Dan jerked, found the gun, but seemed unable to raise it. Burt looked for the source of the shot, saw Mitch lying on the ground, revolver wavering wildly in his hand.

Sim panicked, and flung both handsful of dynamite sticks at Burt. A couple of them hit him, having no more hurting power than potatoes, and the rest thumped harmlessly against the rock floor.

Movement and action had backed Burt into the main tunnel, and suddenly he turned and ran. Another handful of dynamite sticks came after him, landing on head and shoulders, and then he was out of range, swallowed in complete darkness.

His lungs strained to bursting. The only sound here was the pound of his feet and the tortured gasp of his breathing. He heard talk, shouting and the beat of hooves, and stopped, terror stricken until he thought, "The Riorsons are all behind me."

Then he began to shout. The wild shaking of reaction trembled in his limbs, and sobs tore at his throat. This was the way John Cross found him. . . .

The tunnel is sealed now. Cattle roam the Clear Creek Valley, sleek and fat, and Stella Norden, now Stella Cross is serene and happy at Clevis Cross.

There is a new house in Norden's meadow, for Lucy's and Burt's family is increasing.

Yet there are times, when dust clouds sweep across the meadow, that Burt will remember, will think of the three Riorsons behind the gray walls of the state's prison. There are times when he will think of Mitch, dead on the gallows for the murder of Nick Norden. He will finger the long knife scar on his thigh, and then he will smile—for all that is past. He will smile a deeper smile for all good things that are yet to come.. . . .

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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"You mean to wear that thing here?" he said harshly

The Rancher Takes a Wife

By FRANK P. CASTLE

Flounces and frills,

ruffles and lace—

To her they were pretty,

To him, a disgrace!

CHRIS TALLEY shipped fifteen hundred head, that autumn, and savored the realization that he was over the hump at last. Well, he had earned it—five years of chewing boot, cutting every corner. He had toughed it out and built himself a ranch.

Ede Lawton, the banker at Alpine, congratulated him:

"I might have given you a lift, Chris, but

I know there's nothing like knowing you've made it under your own steam. Now you're in the clear, no troubles ahead to fret you much."

"Maybe one—those pesky Guerras," Chris said.

"They still laying claim to Sangre Canyon?"

"That's it," Chris growled. "Running their stringy stock on my grass!"

"Well, Guerras have been here a long time, Chris. Once the family owned everything for two hundred miles, all directions. Now they've been cut down until . . . you're not using the canyon for graze, are you?"

"You suggesting I let them make free use of grass the law says is mine?" Chris snapped.

"Guess not." Lawton turned remote, rustling papers on his desk. "See you in the spring, eh?"

"I've got something more you can do for me, Ede," Chris said. "Built myself a house this summer, but I rattle around in it. I'm going to get married."

"Why—that's very pleasant news!" Lawton beamed. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Don't know," Chris said. "I want you to line me up somebody."

The banker stared at him, mouth sagging. "But—you have to court a girl, first!"

"Got no time for that," Chris said. "I know what I want—a sturdy woman who can keep a house, do chores, somebody sensible. Who's around that fits the bill, Ede?"

Lawton slowly wagged his head. "I'll be damned!" he began. And caught himself. "Wait a minute! Maybe—just maybe, there's a girl who might be interested. . . ."

"Have her here at three," Chris said, rising. "I've got to head out by five—aim to be home and working, tomorrow."

SHE sat with feet and knees tightly together, hands clasped in her lap, eyes lowered. She wore a shapeless gray dress, old and cut down from a larger size. Small fans of brown hair showed on either side of a limp hat.

Sort of skinny, Chris thought. Young, too. He felt doubtful.

"Her pa went broke dry-farming down on the Grant—died of weak lungs in July, left her all alone," Lawton murmured to him. "She's been choring for board at the hotel, a rough deal. She says she's willing, Chris."

Well, at least no kin-folks would come to live on him. Studying her, Chris felt something stir, inside. She was—well, kind of pretty.

"Miss—" he said, clearing his throat.

She looked up. He saw a pale, delicately featured face, big pansy eyes. Yes, pretty. Her lips were trembling a little.

"I'm not a mean man, or a rough one," Chris said gruffly. "I own twenty thousand acres of grass, and I aim to own more. You won't find me chinchy about money. I'd appreciate you marrying me. All right?"

She nodded mutely.

"Let's get right at it, then," Chris said. "Oh—one thing more: What's your name?"

Her reply was barely audible. "Loretta. . . ."

It had a gentle ring. He started out, caught a look from Lawton, and turned back, reaching for her hand. It felt very small and cold in his. . . .

Chris was in saddle, with his punchers, heading for the Sangre hills. Loretta rode the wagon with Rufe Haines, his cook.

Mrs. Chris Talley, now. Two bucks for a license, five more to a preacher, and it was done. He had almost forgotten to kiss the bride; another meaningful look from Lawton had reminded him. The first time he had ever touched lips with a woman—had always figured folks made a lot of fuss over it for nothing. And it had been kind of—well, pleasant.

He had escorted her to Cresswell's Store. "My wife—anything she wants—put it on my bill." Then he had cleared his throat. "Something for a present, first—heard it's customary."

Cresswell suggested a bottle of toilet water. Loretta's eyes had lighted up momentarily—first time, likely, anybody had ever given her anything.

Chris left her to shop and picked up his punchers, sending a hard look around. "If anybody has got ideas of a shivaree, he'd better draw his time now; he'll be moving too fast later to pick it up!"

Later, he wondered if he should have made that warning milder. It might be they had meant to congratulate him, but they certainly hadn't after he spoke so harshly.

Chris shrugged this small qualm of doubt impatiently aside. He had definite ideas about the foolishness with which people cluttered their lives. A man kept his head down, tended strictly to business, or he got nowhere. Just because he had taken a wife was no reason to soften up any.

He ordered the night stop at Yucca Creek, had a tarp set up, made a bed under it, and hung a blanket so Loretta would have privacy.

AFTER supper, she dried dishes for Rufe. The punchers grouped together; Chris sat apart. He had never been one for idle talk. There had always been much to think about, plans to make. Tonight, his mind was empty of worries, no particular planning to ponder, but he couldn't break long habit.

Loretta went to the makeshift tent. Chris waited a bit and followed along. She was brushing her hair, by lantern-light. The gray dress had been removed. She wore some sort of under-garment, pieced out of flour sacks, with eyelets at the top holding a pink ribbon.

Her hands were still as she became aware of him.

"Why didn't you get yourself something at Cresswell's and throw that away?" he demanded, staring at the flour-sacking. "My wife doesn't need to dress herself like a nester's woman!"

"There wouldn't have been time to change, even if I had got a ready-made," Loretta said. "And I bought something I thought was—nice—"

She opened a package and brought out a nightgown. It was white, with a lot of ruffles and flounces, and you could nearly see right through it.

A pulse pounded in Chris Talley's throat. But he turned for a look at the punchers, clustered about Rufe's fire.

"You meant to wear that thing—*here?*" he said harshly.

"Why, yes. . . ."

Then her gaze followed his to the punchers, and deep color showed in her cheeks. She crowded the garment back into its wrappings. Her chin trembled; a tear splashed her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

Chris grunted. A man had to do a thing right, whatever he tackled. He had headed off the foolishness of a shivaree. And he wasn't going to take any chance at all on anybody seeing that fancy night-dress and spreading talk about it. His marriage wasn't going to be made a subject of sniggering gossip.

Loretta, though, had taken his words to mean he suspected maybe she wouldn't make it too difficult for the punchers to see it. He had to stop such a notion, right now. But words came uncommonly hard. Chris fumbled vainly for them, meanwhile taking a step forward and putting his hand on her shoulder.

He didn't think it was a rough gesture, but Loretta went rigid. Her eyes looked smoky, in the lantern-light. Then she relaxed, and he could sense the effort it took. As plainly as if she had spoken, she was admitting she belonged to him—as much as any horse or cow on his grass. There was no argument from her on that score. And no enthusiasm at all about it showed on her face, either.

Chris turned abruptly and walked away. He went up the creek and sat on a log, rolled a cigarette, smoked it down, rolled another. He smoked his throat raw, while the punchers turned in and the fire died down. The lantern under the tarp was long out.

When he was sure everybody was asleep, he tiptoed up and took a look. Moonlight showed the pale delicacy of her features, relaxed in slumber; she had put on another nightgown, more sack-work, high-necked and scratchy looking.

He knelt there beside her for quite a while, but did no more than look at the softness of her features in a shaft of moonlight. After that terrible, mute submissiveness, he couldn't. He got another blanket from the wagon, rolled himself in it on the bank with saddle for a pillow, and stared sleeplessly at the stars, wondering what he was going to do next.

DAWN was near when it came to him suddenly that he probably wouldn't have to do anything. When they got to the ranch, and she found what a good thing she had, things would straighten out. Sure . . . nothing to worry about at all.

It didn't work out that way.

They reached the Circle T early next afternoon, and his chest expanded some as he handed Loretta down from the wagon, escorted her across the porch and through the front door.

The house was in the lee of a knoll, set well away from the bunkshack, barns and corral. There were wide windows in front, with a view of Sangre Canyon, off to the west, of Yucca Creek, with a wide, quiet pool only about fifty yards from the front door. Some trees around, willow and cottonwood, plenty of shade for midday heat. Chris felt proud as he pointed everything out.

Loretta nodded agreement with his brags. She murmured that she'd see what could be done about curtains for the windows. Rufe brought her things and she put them in the bedroom Chris had been using. He started to clear out his spare boots, soiled clothes and odds and ends of gear, but she said no, to let her do it.

Chris went out to check on things, feeling optimistic. When he returned, she was fixing his supper.

But—few women anywhere could equal Rufe Haines when it came to feather-light biscuits and steaks charred on the outside, pink in the middle, the way Chris liked them . . . least of all, a girl who had been limited mostly to cornbread and salt pork heretofore.

Her biscuits could have served as doorstops, her coffee was bittter, and her steaks . . . Chris exploded when he tried to cut them. Maybe if she had exploded back, or wept—but she didn't; she turned white and mute, hurriedly stoked the stove and started to try again. He slammed out of the house, went down to the bunkshack and curtly ordered Rufe to prepare him a meal.

He came back later, feeling better, to find her waiting, the bed turned down, wearing that ugly flour-sack nighgown—silent still, again with the expression of submissiveness that was like a rough-rasp file on his nerves. Chris went into the other bedroom and spent the night on a lumpy cot.

Next morning, she was up before him, struggling to fix his breakfast.

"Forget that," Chris said. "I'll eat with the crew, have something sent up to you."

It was sensible—no use of her getting up at first light, anyway. And he couldn't have his wife eating in the bunkshack. Loretta made no comment, but she was rigid again, and Chris sensed it made things even worse, Why, why could he never seem to say the right thing—so that her features would soften toward him in the daylight as they had that night when she slept in the moonlight?

Well . . . when everything else failed, a man could always find relief in work.

There was plenty to do. The hills protected this high range from the full fury of winter storms, but a blizzard back-lash could result in a bad die-up if an outfit wasn't prepared for it. Chris drove his crew hard, spreading stock on lowland graze, putting out hay, combing the hill draws for cattle that had strayed up-slope, cutting out Guerra cows and shoving them into Sangre Canyon.

No question about it, he had to clean out that bunch of squatters soon. The canyon grass was more fit for goats than cattle; he didn't intend to use it, but he had to get rid of these stringy cows that were constantly drifting out and threatening the blood lines of his stock.

ON a gray fall morning he was working the draws with four others when he heard a hail from Steve Grimes, his straw-boss. Grimes was down in a brushy hollow, dismounted. Chris hit the dirt also, joined him in studying the remains of a butchered steer.

"Guerra work!" Chris said grimly. "So now they're gouging me for table beef! Well, I'm going after that damned bunch of thieves—"

"Take another look," Grimes said. "That's a Guerra cow."

Chris felt surprise as he discovered this was true. "Now, who in the devil would slice up one of those miserable bone-racks?"

"The same ones who did that," Grimes told him, pointing. "See how the tracks run

up the draw? Heading for that rocky rise yonder, I'd say, then working off toward the west. . . ."

Chris bent over the tracks and worked up the draw. A small jag of beef, around thirty head, collected and driven in a hurry.

"Ours, no doubt about it," Grimes observed. "Five in the outfit that grabbed them. Eighteen bucks apiece on the hoof over at Cruces, where they're asking no questions for meat to feed those railroad construction crews. And they butched the Guerra steer for a couple of quarters to chew on while they're making the drive."

"Maybe the Guerras, hunting quick pocket money and downing their own beef to throw us off," Chris said.

Grimes shook his head. "I know how you feel about them, Chris. Sure, they're ornery. But beef-thieves? No."

Chris looked at him sharply. "You taking up for that rag-bag bunch?"

"I'm just telling you the way I see this business. You want I should call the boys and follow those tracks?"

"Not much use of that. They're four days old, at least; our stuff is dressed and hanging in Cruces, by now. But this outfit will likely be back. I want a close watch for them set."

He rode home, a little later. There was a ratty old buggy out front, a spavined nag between the shafts. He seldom had visitors. Chris went inside, wondering who could be calling.

He heard the clatter of female tongues. In the front room, a youngster was crawling on the carpet— boy, not more than two, dark-skinned, big-eyed, solemn. Chris grinned; he had a shy liking for kids. "Who you belong to, son?"

Loretta came in. A girl was with her—young, rather thin, poorly dressed, but neat and clean. Her voice made a gentle, liquid sound; she and Loretta were excitedly talking about a bright roll of cloth Loretta held.

They both fell silent as they saw Chris. Then Loretta hurriedly murmured an introduction; the other girl was Victoria Guerra. She smiled and corrected Loretta . . . Mrs. Joaquin Guerra, wife of the youngest son of old Martin, leader of that clan.

Chris stiffened, feeling a rush of blood to his face. "Not your fault—haven't had a chance to explain to you," he told his wife. "But Guerras aren't welcome here." He inclined his head to Victoria. "Don't mean to shove you, ma'am, but I guess you'd better take your child and ride on. We'd appreciate it if you didn't come back, too—"

The girl stared at him, a glitter of angry, humiliated tears in her dark eyes; she scooped up the boy and hurried out, head averted from him. Loretta had tried to say something, tried to press the roll of cloth into her hands. Victoria ignored this gesture.

They listened to the buggy roll creakingly away. Loretta stood with shoulders drooping. Chris shifted from one foot to the other. "Look, I want you to have woman friends! Mrs. Hogan, now, over at the Star spread; you could call on her—"

"A woman who always treated me like dirt, when I was waiting table at the hotel?" Loretta said bitterly.

"Well . . . I won't have a Guerra in this house!"

"Victoria came to welcome me here. We were so pleased to be neighbors, nobody else our ages nearby. I—I know you're having trouble with her menfolks over that canyon; she told me that. But I didn't think you'd let the way you felt about them extend to her—and that little baby—"

CHRIS felt like a man caught whipping blood out of a horse. A cute kid, sure, and his mother had looked like she was well-mannered. But—Guerras!

"They're moving on, those canyon squatters, soon as I've got time to deal with them," he growled. Then, in an attempt to put the whole incident behind them, "Where'd you get that stuff you're holding? It's right pretty."

"One of Victoria's wedding presents—one of the few she got," Loretta said unevenly. "She had been keeping it for a dress some day, but brought it to me as a neighborly gesture. We were figuring how to fix curtains for the windows when you—"

She dropped the cloth on the floor and ran from the room.

Chris stared at the stuff, unrolled a little, a bright puddle on the carpet. After a bit, he

went back through the house. The door of her bedroom was closed, this time—and locked.

He knocked hard. There was no answer.

Well, a man had pride or he didn't have anything. Chris went down to the bunkshack and told Steve Grimes he was taking back the little room at the rear.

It was four days before he went to the house again, to pick up a fresh pair of long johns and a clean shirt. The bolt of cloth lay right where Loretta had dropped it, and there was dust everywhere. She looked wan and drawn, but composed; they were formal and polite with each other, like a couple of strangers.

The beef thieves hit again, toward dawn a couple of days later. Steve Grimes had men out, watching, and a kid puncher, hired at fall roundup, made a valiant try to stop them. He got a bullet in his leg.

The puncher crawled some, emptied his gun, signaling; they went out and brought him in, made him comfortable.

"Your pay goes right on, with some extra to make up for that slug," Chris told him. "Rufe, hitch a fast team to the buckboard and head for Alpine. Bring back the doctor. Also, plenty of shells. Next time around, we're going to blood those thieves!"

"Chris, I think they ran, without the gather they'd made," the kid said. "It might be they're still somewhere close."

At first light, Chris led a couple of good men; plus Steve Grimes, for a look. They found where the boy was hit, and Grimes said, "He was right. Cattle tracks, scattering; horse tracks, heading off at a run toward the north."

"Toward Sangre Canyon, too," Chris said. "Catch them, and they'll likely turn out Guerras. Let's follow along."

They kept after the tracks through a long day, looping up into the hills. The thieves had stopped, after a while, to smoke and talk things over, then had moved on.

"Going to split up," Grimes prophesied.

He was right. The rustlers soon broke apart, scattering in all directions. Five of them. It was in the usual pattern—separate, confuse anybody following, come together later on.

"For another try," Chris said. "Here's a fellow sitting a big cayuse—the leader, for a bet. We'll trail him."

The tracks of that one led straight east, toward Sangre Canyon—and would end in a Guerra corral, of that Chris felt certain. But the rider circled down past the mouth of Sangre, then went into the hills again.

AT LATE afternoon, hoofprints showed other riders beginning to join again the one they were following. Chris reined down his horse. "It's plain enough, now."

They had split and re-gathered; they were going to try for another steal. Chris looked searchingly off toward his east range, then pointed to where a faint blur of dust showed. The day was cold and blowy, but that dust was being kicked up by hard-pushed cattle.

"No time to send for help," Chris said. "We'll have to handle them. Let's go."

They angled fast toward that eddying dust haze. Then Chris saw somebody coming along the Alpine road and sent the others on, while he cut over that way. To his surprise, he saw Ede Lawton, driving his buggy with its fast-stepping team of grays.

The banker studied him gravely. "Heard of your troubles, Chris. Sorry. And the Doc won't be along today; he's out of town. One of the Guerras was in town this morning hunting him—a kid up at the canyon is sick."

"You drive all this way just to tell me that, Ede?"

"No," Lawton said. "Loretta sent word by Rufe Haines; she wants me to take her back to Alpine."

Chris felt a stir of hot anger, but it died quickly, leaving only gray hopelessness. "All right, Ede. Go ahead. Guess it wasn't meant to work out. Anything she wants—anything at all—see she gets it, and charge me."

"She wouldn't take a cent," Lawton said. "Chris, I'm going to talk to you tougher than I ever talked to any man. Being hard-headed is a good trait, but you over-do it—"

There was a sudden distant popping of guns, thin yells; Chris spun his horse and went off in a hurry toward those sounds.

He spurred up a rise and saw it all below him. His men had hit them, and the thieves were on the run. They were lining out for

the hills, moving fast.

Grimes and the pair with him were trying to cut them off, but had struck too soon; they were getting away.

Then Chris saw some riders off to the west, more of his punchers—they had heard the shooting and were coming to join in.

Everything happened fast. He saw the rustlers, half a mile away, only four of them now—Grimes and his punchers must have gotten one. They stopped for a moment of hurried talk, then sprinted straight for the mouth of Sangre Canyon.

Not Guerras. One quick glance had showed him this. He knew Grimes was right about the Gueras not having anything to do with raiding his beef. But it didn't seem to matter, now—nothing did, not even spurring after those four. Not after what Lawton had told him.

Where he sat, Chris could see a little way up the canyon, along the rutted wagon-track winding down it. Suddenly he saw the same ratty old buggy he had noticed the other day, on that road. A woman was driving. The knowledge that it was probably Victoria Guerra, bringing out her sick boy to the doctor, seemed to explode in him, leaving a sharp pain of all he and Loretta would never have together.

It was a narrow road; those racing horses would pile full tilt into the rig . . . Chris sank spurs deep, lifted his gun, and went downslope at a wild run toward the canyon, throwing a couple of long shots, trying to drive those four on west. They whipped into the canyon, quirting their mounts hard, sending some answering bullets back.

Chris pounded between towering dark walls, close behind them, a long pair of miles from the nearest of his outfit.

He heard yells ahead, a crashing sound, and lashed around a bend to see a confused fog of dust, the buggy over on its side, milling horses, a woman down on hands and knees in the road, dodging thrashing hooves and screaming something in a thin, furious voice.

GUNS roared wildly, awakening monstrous, crashing echoes. Three of the riders got past the smashed buggy and kept running. The fourth tried to spur his mount up a steep bank. The animal made it for about twenty feet and then pitched over backward, plunging down. His rider came with him, bouncing, rolling, twisting like a cat, snapping a shot at Chris, who landed running, got a handful of his shirt, battered knuckles against his jaw, and laid him out.

He turned back, then, and grabbed up the Guerra youngster, who had been thrown from the buggy into a thick matting of brush. He was wrapped in a blanket, apparently unhurt, but his face was flushed and very hot to the touch of Chris' palm.

"Give him to me!" Loretta said, and snatched the boy from her husband's arms.

She hugged the child tightly, hair dishevelled, clothes floured with dust, a wicked bruise against her temple. Chris stared, dumbfounded.

"Joaquin just made it to our place, coming back from town. He's sick, Victoria, too. They're all sick, up there! I rode to give what help I could, and saw the little one must have a doctor's care quick, borrowed their buggy to bring him out. And I'll get him to Alpine if I have to walk!"

She was starting down the road. Chris grabbed at her arm. Loretta jerked furiously away from him; he had never dreamed there was such temper in her. But this was no time to think of that. Those rustlers were inexplicably coming back, horses racing downgrade, a lot of shooting going on as somebody pressed them hard.

Chris shoved Loretta at the overturned buggy. "Get down, honey—please!" He leaned over her as she knelt there, gun out, lips skinned back from his teeth. The three beef thieves appeared, low on their mounts, riding at the wrecked rig that blocked them.

Chris knocked one into the dust with a fast shot; the horse of another reared, spilling its rider. The third set his mount at the buggy and sailed over it. The horse's foam-flecked shoulder brushed Chris and slammed him violently against a broken wheel. He swung his gun, and fired again. The horseman threw up both arms and fell hard, on his back.

Then the one who had been spilled on the buggy's far side came around it. He blasted a bullet at Chris that burned the air a split inch in front of his eyes, then chopped a gun-

barrel savagely at his head. It missed, crunching into shoulder muscle. This put him too close for Chris to shoot; he slammed a fist into the fellow's belly and they went down together, rolling and slugging in the dirt.

The rustler was big and tough, frantically eager to finish this fast and get away. But Chris was mad clear through. "Hurt my wife, you dogs!" He gave it to him with knees, boots, pile-driving fists—and when he staggered erect the man stayed put, doubled in the dust, whimpering.

NOW the Circle T punchers were coming. And some riders had appeared on the uphill side of the buggy. Guerra men, all shaky in their saddles, sick, ragged, but still with their chins stiff.

"It came to us we could not let the *Señora* go alone, with word of *malditos* in the hills, so we saddled and followed," old Martin Guerra growled. Then he spat. "Cattle thieves . . . we hate them, too!"

"Yeah?" Chris said, aware Loretta was watching him with a strange expression, maybe because of his rage at that bruise on her temple. Well, the spunk she had shown had surprised him, too. "Guerras, I'm obliged for your help. . . ."

Then he was angry with himself, because it sounded grudging. He walked around the buggy and stuck out his hand at Martin Guerra. The old man frowned, but after a moment he accepted it. And he had a good grip, strong and firm.

Chris hoped this would help him, with Loretta. He couldn't tell, for sure; she was hurrying toward Ede Lawton's buggy, with the sick boy.

Along toward nine, Lawton yawned and said, "I'll bunk with your boys, Chris—head for home at first light."

"Ede, you're staying here!" Chris protested. Being alone with Loretta scared him, now he was right up against it.

Loretta was silent. Lawton refused the invitation, and went out. It looked like he figured everything was all right. But what was Loretta thinking?

Things had worked out pretty good, in a way. Back at the Circle T, they had found the doctor from Alpine just arriving. He was uphill now, with the Guerras. Chris had sent along some grub—had talked with old Martin about helping them through the winter and building up Guerra stock next spring. Good people. They'd make good neighbors.

He hoped he was on the right track. Still, Loretta hadn't spoken a word of encouragement all evening. She had fixed a surprisingly good supper, evidence Rufe had been giving lessons. But that might not mean a thing.

Chris turned back from the door, after letting Lawton out. He moistened his lips, and spoke desperately, "Loretta . . . if you want me to admit I was a hard-headed fool, like Ede told me, I'll do it. Anything!"

A gun went off outside, making him jump violently. Another gun joined in. Tin pans banged together. Wild whoops sounded, including Lawton's.

He wheeled angrily to the door again. "I warned them!"

Then he stopped, and took a look at his wife. She was standing tensely, watching him. This was her doing, he realized suddenly. Her test, that foolish racket—and how he took it would determine whether he got a wife or lost her for good.

Chris plunged across the room, arms out. Loretta came running, to meet him half-way. There was no submissiveness about her now; her lips were ardent, as hungry as his own.

The noise got louder. He grinned. It was sort of fun, being shivareed. Then: "Honey—you know that pretty thing I made such a fool fuss about; the first night? I hope you've still got it around—"

Her responsive smile was luminous, happy. "I've still got it around," Loretta said.

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Belle turned on Lafe like a wildcat

ANYBODY'S MAN

By Evelyn D. Rice

•

There's nothing like the power of a redhead— unless it's two redheads!

GOING somewheres, son?" inquired Lafe LeMay coldly, lowering his chin to stare over his glasses at his long-legged nineteen-year-old.

Since Steve's lanky form was decked out in his very best gray gabardines, boots that shone like a race horse's flanks, and a spotless creamy white stetson, and since he jingled the keys to the pickup in his hand, it was a pretty safe thing that he wasn't just going out to slop the hogs. A wave of red washed over the brown of his cheeks as he stammered:

"Yeah, Dad, I—I was figuring on taking a ride down the valley. Something I could—uh—do for you?"

"If you're going to Belle Hargrave's," stated his father harshly, "there's two things you can do for me: one, wring her scrawny neck, and, two, stay away!"

"I ain't agoing to Belle's," said Steve

defensively.

"Fourth time you've been out this week."

"Oh? It doesn't seem like it."

"There's something going on between you and that li'l redheaded heifer of Belle's," accused his father sternly.

"Who—Binnie? Aw, Dad, you're just suspicious 'cause you and Belle—"

"Me and Belle nothing, that spavined ole widow done me out of the finest ranch in the county."

"Now Dad, you knew that land wasn't good for anything when you sold it to her. I remember how you laughed to take the money."

"It's worth ten times what she paid for it."

"It is now, but it wasn't then. Now that she's built it up into the finest dude ranch in the country you're sore 'cause you didn't think of it first."

"You know doggoned well I'd never have sold it to her if she hadn't come sweetening me up till I was like a frog on a hot rock. As far as her turning it into a dude ranch goes, I was just about to think of that myself, in a little bit."

"Well—I'm not going to Belle's anyhow, Dad."

"Okay, son, I'll take your word for it."

THE old man went back to his reading, and Steve ducked out fast. He hadn't told a lie; he wasn't going to Belle Hargrave's Bar BH Dude Ranch. Too many people saw him when he went there to call on Binnie, so he was forced to meet her at the old line shack near the creek. There he drove that night, and a few minutes after he'd parked, she showed up, scrambling her little sorrel mare down through the manzanita and scrub oak. She wore jeans, and a checkered shirt open at her creamy throat, and her flat crowned hat hung down her back so that the flaming red hair flowed loose.

"Hi, Stevie," she greeted him, "what's new?"

"Only thing I know is the old man's snorting and pawing the ground," said Steve gloomily. "He's got a notion I been seeing you."

Binnie frowned and bit her lip thoughtfully. "We've got to do something about your dad."

She jumped down from the little sorrel, and Steve helped her into the pickup, where they sat close together. Steve was maddeningly aware of her clean, sweet smell, her soft little body near to him; and he wanted to bury his face in the red pillow of hair. He pulled his arm tight around her and wondered if all that thudding he felt could be in his own chest.

"Let's get married, Binnie, honey, right away."

"Oh, Stevie! You know I want to, but your Dad wouldn't stand for it, and we're both under age."

"Your Ma wouldn't be mad, would she?"

"I don't think so. Of course, she doesn't know we're—so serious, but she always did kind of like you. It makes her feel bad that your Dad doesn't like her any more. When I went away to school, they were getting along real well."

Steve kicked moodily at the brake pedal. "Yeah, Dad gets a crazy notion and he's a wild man. He's sore 'cause he thought he took her plenty when he unloaded that ranch on her, and then she turned around and built it up into a good thing."

"What are we going to do about him?"

"I'll be twenty-one some day," Steve said grimly.

She twisted her neck to look up at him. "But I get scared, Stevie. S'pose some girl comes along—that your Dad likes? The world's full of girls just waiting to grab a man—anybody's man."

"Aw, Binnie!" He spent quite a few minutes proving to her that she was the only one for him. Finally she pulled away and smoothed her flaming hair.

"You'd better stop that," she said breathlessly. "Besides, you've got to get back home."

"I'll try to see you tomorrow night, honey."

"I'll be here. 'Bye, Steve."

But the next morning at breakfast, Lafe issued his son an ultimatum that sounded like the break-up for Steve and Binnie.

"Son, it seems like you been driving down to the old line shack and meeting that red-

head, and I want it to stop."

"I didn't figger you'd spy on me, Dad."

"I don't spy on nobody! Ole Tim Wilson rode by there last night on his mule and seen you."

"And he hot-footed it over here to tell you."

"Yes, by golly! I told him it wasn't any of his doggoned business, but it is mine. That'll stop."

"Aw, look, Dad—"

"I'm keeping the keys to the pickup. You can have your choice of any girl you doggone please—except that redheaded heifer of Belle's. Let me catch you buzzing around that beehive and I'll beat the hide off'n you, like I should have done ten years ago."

IT HURT Lafe to lay down the law that way to his son, but he knew no good could come of a Hargrave, and wounds heal fast when you're nineteen. In fact, it wasn't but a couple of weeks later that Tim Wilson halted his mule at the blacksmith shed to pass along the news that Steve was recovering from his loss.

"See Steve's got a new gal. . . "

"That so?" Lafe wiped the sweat from his forehead to hide the interest in his eyes. Shoeing an ornery, highstepping stallion in the boiling sun was hot work.

"Seen him down by the crick talking to a white-headed filly on a paint cayuse."

"An old lady, y'mean?" asked Lafe incredulously.

"Naww! What'd he want with an old lady?" scoffed Tim. "I mean one of them white-headed li'l biscuits like you see in the movies."

A platina blonde?"

"Yeah, yeah. Platina. Man, man, if I was forty years younger and had my health —here they come now. That's her with him now."

Lafe straightened up, inwardly excited. "Well, I reckon you're in a hurry, Tim. Uh-uh," he said, taking a good look at the dude gal who rode beside his son, "make that about exactly fifty years younger! So long, Tim."

Tim didn't dismiss easy, but seeing that his company was plainly not welcome, he reluctantly clucked his mule into a slow amble on up the road.

"Hi, Dad," called Steve, grinning like a boy with a new jackknife. "This here's Miss Ardelia Montgomery, she's a—a singer—"

"A zinger is right, son," said Lafe gravely, looking the lady over with politely paternal interest.

"No, no, Dad, a *singer*. You know, with a band, a big dance band, from New York City. She's been staying at the hotel in town—uh—lately. This here's my Dad," he mumbled apologetically.

If Ardelia saw anything in old Lafe to apologize for, she didn't show it. The calculating green-eyed stare she turned on him grew instantly warm and loving. She blinked the heavy black lashes once and arched her back in the saddle the least bit.

"We-ell," she cooed, extending a soft, white hand, tipped with the longest, reddest nails Lafe had ever seen. "This is a great pleasure—definitely. Steve's been bragging about his Dad, but I never dreamed you'd be half so wonderful as Steve said. The truth is," she explained ruefully, "the big dance band is no more. It went—poof—leaving poor little me stranded, to starve in the desert."

"Come in," urged Lafe, under the spell of the admiring green eyes. "Come in and set in the shade. We'll rustle up something cold to drink." He untied the stallion and sent him off with a whack on the rump, while Steve and Ardelia swung off.

Ardelia might have been a poor, stranded tenderfoot from New York, but the green eyes didn't miss much as she walked under the spreading oaks to the ranch house.

"Umm, you have the loveliest ranch, Mr. LeMay. And all those lovely steers—" gesturing back toward the valley "—they look just like a mint walking around."

Lafe glanced at her. "Steers" sounded like she might possibly know a beef critter if she met one.

"You've lived in cattle country, Miss Montgomery?"

"Oh, no! But I love it, I simply adore it. I could stay here forever. And you must call me Ardelia—Steve and I are *such* friends." Steve came in for his share of the

blandishing eyes this time.

When they were seated in comfortable chairs on the wide shady porch, Steve offered to fix a cool drink, leaving Ardelia and old Lafe alone.

"Your son's a wonderful, wonderful boy," she confided at once, "don't you think so? But of course you do. Umm, I suppose all this will be Steve's some day?"

Lafe squirmed a little. City-gals—you never knew how to take them.

"Yeah, yeah. I reckon I'll leave Steve well fixed," he admitted.

"Umm, I should think *so!* How does it happen that such a big, handsome brute isn't married?"

"Oh, Steve's only nineteen, and that's too young to think about getting hitched."

"Nineteen? But they marry young out in this country, I've heard," she said thoughtfully.

Steve appeared with a tray on which stood tall, frosty glasses. "Here's some lemonade."

She blinked. "Lemonade? Oh. Umm, I don't know when I had a glass of lemonade last!" She took one and sipped it luxuriously. "The way things are, this may be my last nourishment for quite a while." Her eyes flicked the two men idly.

"Dad," said Steve, "come in here a minute."

Lafe rose stiffly and went into the house with his son, who was grinning embarrassedly.

"Uh—Dad. The poor kid's really up against it. I'm not kidding. The band she was with folded, and she's flat broke. She ain't even got money for her hotel and eats. Look—why don't we ask her to stay here—uh—till she gets on her feet?"

Lafe's head was in a whirl. Away from the spell of those big cat eyes, he was able to judge the singer gal coldly, and he was thinking that she was maybe just a little bit—well, once he'd laid, hidden, on a shelf of rock, and watched for a long time a tawny panther stretched out on a heavy oak limb, waiting for prey and staring—with hungry green eyes.

"Now, son, I don't know's that would look proper—"

"Aw, Dad, you know there'd be nothing wrong with it."

Ardelia's lithe and eye-filling form weaved itself through the door.

"Is Stevie telling you that he very, very kindly invited me to come stay with you, Mr. LeMay?" she cooed. "And I accepted . . ."

Once she was moved in, bag and baggage, and had had a few days to work on Steve, Lafe knew which way the dust was blowing, and it looked just like it was headed to bury him.

She was out to get Steve, no matter how. The plainer he saw her in her true light, the blinder Steve grew. He took her daily for long rides into the mountains. He sat with her for hours at night on the porch, his dark, curly head close to her pale, shining mane, and they talked in low, maddening tones, endlessly. Once in a while the talk stopped, and the silence that followed was broken by her tinkling little laugh.

And there wasn't a damn thing she was good for. Around the house, she couldn't chop wood, cook, sweep, or anything else—at least she didn't. When she was there at all, just sat and looked pretty, with those big cat eyes seeing everything.

Another thing. She'd said she was twenty, but out in the sun, close up, Lafe put it a lot closer to thirty. . . .

AFTER three weeks of Ardelia, Lafe was about to blow his top. It was plain that Steve was hopelessly infatuated with the—the gold digger. But she was no scared kid, to be chased off by threats or reminders that Steve was under age.

One night, when they sat longer than usual on the porch, with the silences deeper and the tinkling laughs further and further apart, Lafe tossed and turned in his bed in the high-ceilinged front bedroom till he couldn't stand it any longer.

"Something's gotta give," he moaned, dumping his feet on the floor and sitting fretfully on the edge of the bed, rolling his sixteenth smoke in a row. "If only I had some brains in this old rock head of mine!"

Suddenly his brows shot up, and he stared, slack-mouthed, into the darkness. A glimmer of light had penetrated the rock.

"By golly," he muttered, "if it's me that's gotta give, I can do it."

Lafe rose early and dressed with care in his best brown gabardine pants, his grey silk shirt with the rose and blue and gold embroidery all over it, the fine brown and white boots, the maroon hat—his go-to-rodeo clothes, and prepared to ride. The house was very quiet—Steve and the gold digger were sleeping in, he presumed; set up and neck all night, sleep all day.

He figured that this way his departure would be unobserved, and there would be no need for explanations.

He'd just finished saddling Rookie, the big bay stallion whose shoeing, interrupted by Ardelia's arrival, had finally been finished, when he heard a car coming up the road.

It was a long yellow convertible, a car he knew and hated; bought with money that should have been his, profits from the Bar BH Dude Ranch. And Belle Hargrave drove it like she was packing the mail.

Belle screeched to a smoking stop and climbed out with fire in her eye, advancing on him with such a vengeful look that Lafe shrank back instinctively.

"You!" she snorted. "You ornery, interfering, no good, double crossing, deceitful old scoundrel! I'm here to have a talk with you!"

She had Binnie's red hair, and ordinarily she wasn't a bad looking old heifer, but today she was breathing smoke, and Lafe hadn't time to appreciate her looks.

"Yeah, yeah. Morning, Belle. I was just headed over your way—"

"The hell you were, you old liar! Well, you are all dressed up, aren't you?"

"Sure, Belle, I cleaned up special to go see you. What's on your mind?"

"I'll tell you what's on my mind," she snarled. "It's that two-timing, lady-killing son of yours, Steve LeMay. He's broke my little Binnie's heart, and I aim to break his neck."

Lafe passed a cautious hand across his mouth. It had been his intention to persuade Belle to join him in a campaign to get Binnie and Steve together again, figuring that Binnie might bring the boy to his senses. He hadn't forseen that Belle might have some violent views on the subject herself.

"I didn't know Binnie was so sweet on Steve."

"Well, I didn't either," Belle admitted. "But he led her on and told her he loved her, and all such foolishness like you black-hearted villains tell poor innocent girls, and she believed him. Now, from what I hear, he's taken up with a peroxide snip from some traveling show, and up and dropped my little girl flat. Binnie's eating her heart out; she sets in her room the whole day through, poor baby, and cries and won't eat a bite. And I aim to send that floozie packing or get my satisfaction out of Steve's hide with a horsewhip!"

Lafe was laughing inside till he thought he'd bust. Nothing, right then, would give him such pleasure as seeing the little blonde gold digger sent packing, and it tickled him that the arrangements were suddenly in Belle's capable hands.

With a straight face, however, he said, "Why, sure, Belle, you run right up to the house and talk to the both of 'em. I'll go rout 'em out—you do the talking."

• • •

This Is No Humbug!

Minnie ran a boarding house in Humbug, Colorado. She papered the rooms with old newspapers. When the stagecoach couldn't get through with the mail the miners tilted back in their chairs and reread the papers on the wall.

—Edna Stewart

• • •

BUT Steve and Ardelia were nowhere about. A suspicious glance out the side window showed Lafe something he'd missed seeing before; the pickup was gone, too.

"They're run off!" gasped Belle. She clenched her fists in the pockets of her jeans.

"They have, for a fact," admitted Lafe, in distress. "Oh, what for did I ever let that little white-headed coyote on the place?" He sank into an easy chair in the front room, a picture of dejection.

But Belle was a woman of action.

"Git up off your big fat rump, you sniveling old goat, and do something! Setting there bellyaching isn't going to bring them back. Likely they went to Split Rock to get married and we can catch them if they haven't got too big a lead."

Belle led the way, on the run, to the yellow convertible.

Rookie looked up with interest; then as they drove away, settled down to placid waiting for someone to show up and unsaddle him.

Lafe had ridden with Belle, a time or two, back in the days when a twelve-year-old Model A was all she had; he'd wondered sometimes if she handled the big convertible with any more respect. He soon found out. If Belle ever gave up dude-ranching, there was a big future for her on the hard tops. As they tore down the narrow cliffside dirt road, faster than Lafe himself had ever driven on a four-lane highway, he gave himself up for a goner. It just wasn't in the cards to drive that way and live to see another day.

Belle howled on two wheels—give or take one—off the grade into the wider main road that led to Split Rock, and there she really let it out. Forty miles into town, but Lafe only got about as far as Dear Lord, I know I been a stinking old sinner—when they drew up to a shuddering, dust fogging stop before the cottage of the justice of the peace.

He forced his eyes open. The pickup was parked just ahead of them.

And coming out the door, hand in hand, were Ardelia and Steve. Following them like a happy old hen was the justice, bald-headed old Ben Reedly.

Belle and Lafe abandoned the convertible, but the fight was knocked out of them for the moment.

"We-ell," purred Ardelia, "look who's here—Mr. LeMay, the new father-in-law. You just missed the wedding—Dad."

"Stevie," croaked Lafe, "are you married, honest, for-sure married, son?"

"Sure am, Dad," grinned Steve. "Sorry we didn't ask you to come along, but we left so early I didn't figure you'd be up."

"Oh, if it had only been Binnie," moaned the old man.

"Binnie? I thought you told me—"

"I don't know what I told you no more, son, but it was a damn lie, whatever it was."

Belle turned on Lafe like a wildcat. Broken up as he was over Steve's marriage, the old man feared Belle's wrath more than anything else in the world.

"Lafe LeMay," she snapped, "you fixed this up! I'll see your hide nailed to the barn door if it's my last sight on this earth!"

He backed away, hands out in front of him to ward her off.

"Now Belle, take it easy now, Belle, honey. Calm down, that's the girl, calm down." He cast about desperately for some sacrifice to appease her, for every foot that he retreated was her advance, and there was a gleam in her eye that rattled him right down to the heels. "Look here, Belle," he cried, "tell you what I'll do, I—I'll marry *you* if it'll make you feel any better."

That stopped her. "You'll—*what*?"

"Marry you," he babbled. "That's what I'll do. I'll marry you, if you'll say the word—only just stop looking at me like that."

At that moment, around the corner of the cottage appeared a slight-figured, flame haired girl in a fluffy, white, dotted Swiss dress.

"Binnie," croaked her mother.

Binnie stopped and looked them over without expression: Belle, Lafe, Ben Reedly, Steve, Ardelia. Then she walked slowly up to Ardelia, their eyes fixed unwaveringly on each other's face. A foot away, she stopped, and the two girls stared a minute without a word.

Then, slowly, deliberately, Binnie winked one big blue eye, and Ardelia, just as slowly

and deliberately, winked one big green eye right back at her.

"Thanks, *dear*," murmured Binnie emphatically.

"It's okay, *dearie!*" responded Ardelia.

"Come this way, my big, handsome husband," said Binnie, taking Steve's hand. "Mrs. Reedly has those rose slips ready for you to carry out to the pickup."

Another glimmer shot through Lafe's rock head. "Steve's married to *you*, Binnie?"

"Well, certainly, who—oh, good heavens, you didn't think he was married to *Ardelia*, did you? Why, she wouldn't do that to me! We've been friends ever since she coached the dramatics class I took, when I went away to school."

"Thank God," gasped Lafe, and then it came to him. "A put-up job," he yelped. Binnie and Steve nodded, grinning.

At his words, Ardelia swept Lafe with her big, green eyes, and into them came a gleam.

"Why, Mr. LeMay, honey!" she crooned suddenly. "You didn't think an old lady like me would rob the cradle did you?" She slid over his way and stared adoringly up at him. "*I* like older men—ummm, like *you!*"

Luke thought as fast as he ever did in his life, and scooted to Belle's side.

"Much obliged, ma'am," he blurted, "but this lady asked me first!"

Binnie stopped Steve at the corner of the cottage. "No hurry about the rose slips, darling. Poor Mr. Reedly's work is never done, it looks like . . . Ardelia's already married, aren't you, pal?"

A glow of fond remembrance came into the green eyes.

"Ummmmm, yes, dear; and I'd better be getting home to him on the next train. You'd be surprised how this old world's full of nasty women out to get a man—anybody's man!"

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GRIP

Peggy knew what to do with a rope and a branding iron, whether the critter was a calf . . . or a man

THREE young men in evening dress, obviously under the influence of an evening's cocktails, roared along the highway in a custom-built automobile toward a grade crossing. Until the last few seconds, the driver ignored the frantic whistle blasts of an on-thundering freight train, but in those last few seconds escaped death by a side-slipping, skidding halt a yard short of the pounding wheels. The three young men laughed uproariously at the cursing scream of the white-faced engineer as he plunged on into the black night.

"You," she said, "are the mott useless bum ever to come off that railroad!"

of the WEST

by PAUL RANDELL MORRISON

But the freight slowed for a town ahead, blocking the highway by a quarter of its length. Said one of the young men to the driver, "Bob Branton, that lash cocktail—too much for you. Here, I'll drive."

"Ha!" said Branton. He looked around uncertainly. "Where is Gary?"

"Ha!" returned the other, Sam Wells by name, and companion on many a riotous escapade. "I'm sittin' on 'im."

Silence. The headlights of the car flooded the side of an empty boxcar, the door of which was full open, and the name of the railway, Midwestern & Greenville, showed bold against the red-painted background.

Sam Wells said, "See what I see?" Chuckling, he leaned close to Branton and in a rasping whisper told him something that made Branton laugh, too.

Fumbling, they got out of the car and tugged until they had Gary Cortland on his feet.

Tittering as they coaxed, they managed to walk Gary to the empty boxcar. Whereupon, they rolled Gary's semi-stupefied form inside and he promptly went to sleep. Quietly his playful companions slid the door shut. The train bumped to a start and disappeared into the western night.

PEGGY BRISTOL of the Double B ranch came beating out of the brush on her mahogany-colored Morgan full on the heels of a white-faced calf pursued by a bawling cow bearing the Double B brand on her right shoulder. Once clear of the brush, Peggy tossed her loop and Ginger, the horse, dug in all four feet. Synchronized with the movement, Peggy swept out of the saddle at a slant over the horse's left shoulder and hit the ground running. Swooping upon the fallen calf, now being dragged slowly along the muddy earth as Ginger kept the rope taut, Peggy tied a rear and foreleg with a short piece of rope. Whistling to Ginger to ease forward, she loosened the lariat from the calf's neck.

Snatching up some pebbles, she shied them at the angry cow, who retreated sidewise into the brush, only there to keep up an incessant bawling. Peggy took her fence-repairing hatchet from a saddle bag and chopped the rain-soaked outside away from a dead limb. Chipping off a small pile of dry shavings, she soon had a fire going. From the rear of her saddle she untied the Double B branding irons and set them in the fire.

While the irons were heating Peggy looked across the low brushland at the levee where the rising Comanche threatened to spill its spring freshet over its banks. Men from every ranch within fifteen miles were busily sandbagging the levee, working day and night under the efficient direction of United States Government Engineer Tom Gettle, who had legally impressed the services of every man he could lay his hands on. If the levee broke, not only would valuable ranch lands be inundated, but hundreds of small farms downriver would be ruined as well. And that, thought Peggy, was why Peggy Bristol must keep the ranch going by herself until the Double B hands could be released. If only she had one man to help her—just one—and no matter what sort of saddle bum he might be!

In the distance a train whistled, and she turned to look at the curve to the east where the Midwestern & Greenville Railroad started swinging across the northern part of the Double B. The freight pounded into view and whistled again—to stop at the water-tank on the east bank of the Comanche before the long haul across the barren sage and prickly pear waste to the west. The brakes began to howl, and the freight slowed. With a final shuddering of brake-blocks, it stopped abruptly. The fireman tumbled over the tender and yanked the water-tank's spout down into place.

While she watched, a boxcar door slid open and a man let himself down to the ground. He stood for a moment undecided, took a few steps toward the rear of the train, changed his mind and walked toward the front where the fireman was pouring water into the tender. Peggy wondered about that, for no rail-bum ever deliberately sought contact with a train crew. But the fellow walked on toward the front of the long train and was only a half-dozen cars short of the tender when the engine let go a close pair of whistle blasts and chugged violently under way again.

The man paused, turned, and started to

walk back toward the empty car he had just vacated. Evidently realizing that the speed of the train was mounting by the second, he began to run. Too late—the boxcar whizzed past, and though the fellow made a leap and a frantic grab for the doorway, he was flung headlong into the tall Johnson grass that matted the right-of-way. Peggy shrugged and lifted her branding iron from the fire.

Three times she knelt on the calf's neck and tried to clap the hot iron down on its shoulder, only to have the calf squirm from beneath her just as she was ready to apply the iron. This business of branding a calf single-handed was about the trickiest job she had ever done, but she had done it before, and do it again she would if she had to. She decided to tie the other legs and straightened up intending to cross over to Ginger and get some more leg-rope.

FOR a long moment then, Peggy squinted at the strange figure of a man who stood watching her. When he didn't speak, she took inventory of his clothing and person. She had read of people who dressed that way, had seen illustrations of them in the magazines, and had had a good laugh. She had a sudden urge to laugh now, but from the corner of her eyes saw the angry cow pawing out of the brush again and scooted toward the animal with quick, short steps, slapping her rawhide chaps loudly with both hands. When the beast bolted back into the brush, she turned once again to the newcomer, coolly noting the mud-clustered shoes, the side-braided evening trousers, both knees of which bore five-inch rents, and the coat of his full dress suit, rumpled, matted with grease and hay from the floor of the boxcar. Raindrops dripped from the "fishtail" of his coat. The left shoulder of his coat was ripped, and the little white tie was askew.

Ginger sauntered up, flinging his reins so as not to step on them. He, too, began to size up the incongruous stranger.

"Well, Ginger," asked the girl, still studying the bedraggled specimen before her, "do we brand it or just wait for the fall round-up and hope for the best?"

The stranger managed a wry smile, said, "Good morning, my name's Cortland—Gary Cortland. I seem to have fallen upon—"

"Hay," she finished for him. "Alfalfa hay. It's sticking all over you."

"Isn't that what ranchers feed to—feed—"

"Cows."

"Then it isn't poison? I've been chewing on it—kind of sweet-tasting. Last meal I had was—"

"Never mind!" she said tartly. "I've heard that from every railroad bum since I can remember. Here, you hold this calf while I—" But Ginger had stepped inquisitively toward the stranger, nose outstretched, and the stranger was backing rapidly away, palms up as if to ward off a blow.

"Ginger!"

The horse turned back to her, and she led him off to one side and dropped his reins, all the while studying the newcomer with two very wondering blue eyes. Without a word, she set about kindling the fire again, and when done re-set the branding iron in place. While she studied the iron, the stranger asked, "Won't that hurt the little—little cow?"

"Hurt?" she asked in surprise, but then she added, "He isn't a cow."

"Oh!" said the stranger.

She grasped the iron from the fire, touched it lightly to the wet earth, then swished it a couple of times through the air to bring it to the right temperature, and said, "Here, hold that loose hind leg."

She knelt on the calf's neck again, and Gary Cortland, young bachelor about a certain town, knelt in the mud and grabbed for the untied hind leg. Whereupon the calf kicked in protest, the muddy leg slipped from Gary's hands, and the calf's hoof plopped full into his solar-plexus. Gary went over backward in the mud, gasping to get some air back into his lungs.

"You," said the girl, blue eyes glinting in disgust, "are about the most useless bum ever to come off that railroad—and I've seen a lot of them!"

With a toss of her coppery hair, she got a second piece of rope from her saddle bag and quickly tied the calf's other two legs. Then, shoving its neck down with one foot, she slapped the hot iron into the thick hide; a wisp of smoke rose from the burnt hair, and

it was done. To Gary Cortland, now risen to a kneeling position in the mud, she said, "Not a tenth as painful to him as a vaccine needle to a human. Don't look so horrified! Somebody has to grow beef for folks to eat, and this is part of the manufacturing process."

She released the calf, rubbed the iron in the mud to cool it, and a little later wrapped it in a burlap sack and tied it behind her saddle. Grasping up the reins, she mounted Ginger in one quick easy motion. "Well," she said, "pleasant journey, hobo!"

And galloped off.

GARY CORTLAND watched until the girl rounded the shoulder of a hill and dipped from sight into a valley beyond. For a few moments then he studied the men working on the distant levee, but at last turned to go back to the railroad. If one freight stopped for water, another freight would also. He would identify himself to the crew and—ten yards away the infuriated cow pawed the wet earth, her hoofs flinging mud over her back as she swung her head from side to side in angry bawls. He did the wrong thing—he backed up. The cow advanced. He backed up some more, and the cow, head lowered, broke into a forward weaving trot—Gary Cortland wheeled and ran.

He could hear the beat of hoofs behind him, but he took no time to look around. He increased his pace with every jump, and for a time ran on before he realized the hoofs no longer pounded behind him. When he got courage enough to take a fast glance over his shoulder, the cow was just entering the brush again with her calf, bawling defiance at having routed a potential enemy. She was, Gary noted disconsolately, between him and the railroad and showed every intention of remaining there.

He turned to follow the trail left by the girl, for where she went—when had he last eaten? Night before last? He had awakened in the afternoon, and the freight was making fifty miles an hour. Night. The cold penetrated almost at once, and the loose hay for covering gave warmth. He had slept again. Until the stop at the water tank—midmorning.

"If, as, and when," he slowly ground out between chattering teeth, for the drizzling rain had now been joined by a raw east wind, "I ever see those two bosom pals of mine again, I shall return this favor in full, even if I have to sell them down the river."

But, sludging along, he began to smile. It *was* funny—just the sort of trick he would have pulled—if he'd thought of it first.

By the time he got around the shoulder of the hill, he was barely able to lift one foot ahead of the other, but he kept on, head down and dripping. At last, though the grade was downhill now, he had to sit on a small boulder to rest. He could see the ranch buildings in the southeasterly distance through the mist, and as he watched, several horsemen rode away from the levee work and galloped toward the ranch house. Shortly after, a lone man in a buckboard clattered diagonally across Gary's course, but stopped until Gary staggered up. The gray-haired man under the large, battered hat, said, "Get in!" Somehow Gary managed to climb up beside the man, who turned a lean, hard jowl as he gave Gary a surprised, appraising look.

"I'm Ben Bristol," the rancher said, his gander-blue eyes peering stonily from behind squinting lids.

"Gary Cortland," Gary managed between gasps. "I've—I've lost my way."

"So 'twould appear," agreed the rancher.

ONLY the clomp of hoofs and the waxy-sucking noise of wheels pulling away from mud broke the silence. Nobody spoke. The ranch buildings showed sodden in the near distance, but a blue cloud of wood smoke rose half-heartedly from the kitchen chimney and spread out flat and thin over the prairie. Gary caught the faint aroma of boiling coffee, and if his imagination hadn't been pestering his stomach he would have sworn that he could smell roast beef. Probably halved potatoes browned alongside the roast. He had often heard his father say that the best cooking in the world was out near the end of the Midwestern & Greenville, but of course that was when his father worked as a young civil engineer during the construction of the road through this back

country—a long time ago. With a discreet, long sniff Gary tested the delightful fragrance now coming down wind.

Ben Bristol was speaking, "Better eat first, then go out to the bunkhouse and see if some of the hands ain't got a dry shirt and pants."

The buckboard had swung up to the fence near the yard gate, and Bristol was already hitching the horses to a post. As Gary followed the rancher up the walk, he quickly ripped off his white tie and collar, tossing them into some shrubbery.

When he got there, seven ranch hands were already seated at a long table at one end of a mammoth kitchen and under full way, not saying anything—just reaching for dishes and eating, reaching for dishes and eating, reaching again, eating; lifting coffee cups, setting them down and pointing wordlessly for the impassive Chinese cook to refill them. Ben Bristol indicated a vacant place near the end of the table and himself sat down at the head. Without a word, he began to eat, and the cook sloshed coffee into Gary's cup. A ranch hand shoved a large, thick dish down the table with one hand while he continued to feed himself with the other.

Gary said, "Thanks!" The fellow's feeding hand paused, the food just short of his mouth. "Huh?" But then, peering queerly at Gary, he shoved the food home, mumbling, "Oh, shore—shore!" Gary reached for the dish, his dark eyes gleaming with anticipation as his gaze struck the delicious roast and the—not halved, browned potatoes, but large steaming golden sweet potatoes resting in rich brown gravy. He lifted one onto his plate and dug a serving fork into a large slice of roast beef. While his right hand nervously sought his table fork, his left shot out to clutch a pair of tall buttermilk biscuits. He forked into a liberal piece of the fragrant, succulent roast and—

The sudden pound of hoofs. A shout, "Levee's giving way!"

Chairs scraped. In an instant the ranch hands were rushing from the kitchen. One of them bumped Gary's elbow, and fork and roast beef spun across the table.

"You, too!" Bristol called. "We can use another hand. You ride with me."

With an unintelligible cry, mixed of human frustration and animal hunger, Gary got to his feet, but catching sight of the Chinese cook bending double with silent laughter he snatched a biscuit from the table and hurled it at his head. Then, grabbing up a gravy-dripping sweet potato, he took a huge bite and headed toward the door, having every intention of consuming the remainder of the potato en route, but halted when a girl hurried from an inner door into the kitchen. She, too, paused, and he was face to face with the girl who branded calves and didn't think much of railroad bums.

"Well!" she exploded. "You!"

She eyed the big potato in his hand and had a quick glance at his bulging cheeks. He swallowed—again. Chewing a second or two, he swallowed still again.

"It's good," he commented with a wide grin, turning the potato slowly to inspect it. He took another bite and stood to one side of the outer door. "Ladies first," he said, and she swept through like a cyclone.

He followed, but he could not have kept up with that lithe, powerful body had he been in the prime of gym practice, which he was not—which he decidedly was not. He dragged his tired legs toward the buckboard, and was barely in time to climb aboard when Bristol bobbed up into the seat and cracked a buggywhip over the shoulders of the team. As the vehicle tore around in a circle, the girl rode past in a low flat run toward the levee.

"Eat your 'tater," said the rancher, and Gary straightened, realizing that he had been staring after the girl, mouth wide open. "Shore can ride, can't she?" Bob Bristol added admiringly. "My girl. Name's Peggy. Raised her myself after my wife died."

Gary said, "Yes." He didn't know what else to say.

WHEN Bob Bristol whipped the team alongside the levee, Gary saw with wonderment the power of a great river at flood—muddy, frothing, trash-laden. The long-leaping, angry current swished at the very top of the embankment, where men worked so close together they looked like ants.

A tall, whipcord of a man rushed over to the Bristol buckboard, and even before he spoke Gray recognized him as the ranch hand who had been so surprised when Gary thanked him for passing the food at the dinner table. He stopped a little short, frankly staring at Gary's tattered evening dress.

"This is Dave High," said Bob Bristol. "He's my foreman. How's it goin', Dave?"

Dave High, still staring at Gary, shook his head as if to relieve it of confusion. "How's what—oh, the levee? Afraid we're in for it, Mr. Bristol Looks bad."

Bristol took a shovel from the buckboard and hurried toward the levee. Dave High said, "Mind givin' us a hand with the bags?" Without more comment, he handed Gary a shovel and grasped up an empty bag.

"We'll take turns," he said, shaking open the mouth of the bag. "Yes, let's," said Gary, grinning. He began shoveling sand into the bag, and found himself thinking of two very close friends named Bob Branton and Sam Wells. Bosom pals, they were. A man should never forget his friends—never.

He was not cold now. By the time the rainwater drained out of his hair and joined the little rivulets of sweat on his forehead and cheeks and dripped off his chin it was hot. With a little experimenting he found he could lift a shovel of sand easier if he flexed his knees before heaving upward, using his whole body—legs, hips, back, shoulders—instead of just the arms, which he nearly pulled out of their sockets with the first fifty shovelsful. But, even so, he was most grateful when Dave High said, "Want to shift?"

The bag flew out of his hands with the first shovelful Dave scooped in. Bending over to reclaim the bag, his back almost refused to bend, and he had a difficult time corkscrewing himself erect again.

Dave said, "Make a sort of roll before you grab it. Hold on better that way."

"Thanks," said Gary, but looked quickly at Dave, and for a moment they stood there idle, looking straight into each other's eyes. Then, almost at the same instant, both began to laugh. Grimly, Gary said, "Shovel away!"

When they had filled some thirty-odd

sacks, they began lugging them up the embankment and dropping them into place. For a mile north and south other men were doing the same thing. Sandbags in place, Dave High said, "Better let me shovel. You look tuckered."

"Thanks—" Gary rolled the mouth of a bag and set his raw fingers into the burlap. Yet raw fingers were nothing compared to the huge water-blisters in the palms of his hands. Each time he bent to pick up a fresh sack, he thought he would never straighten his back again. Finally, Dave said, "You'd better rest. I'll take a look at what the boys are doin' up river. Back in ten minutes."

Gary sat down, leaning against a pile of sandbags they had just filled and tied. Some of the ache seeped out of his back, but he eyed the blisters in his palms, doubtfully at first and then with disdain—there were no blisters in Dave High's hands. Nor did there seem to be the least ache in his back, yet he had done most of the shoveling and a great

"Gary Cortland, you're either a liar or plain dumb!"

deal more than most of the lugging.

Slowly Gary got to his feet—and began to tie the tops of the last few sacks they had filled. This done, he turned to look up at the levee. A sudden gust of wind whipped water over the top between the last bag they had dropped into place and the soft shoulder of the levee to the south. Even as he watched a tiny cascade trenched its way down the embankment.

Gary flung himself upon the nearest sandbag, but, though he tugged with all his will, he could not hoist it onto his shoulder. Five times he tried, failing miserably. He began to drag the heavy load, but realized instantly that he could never get it across the brush and weeds that grew rank between him and the levee.

FORGETTING aches and blisters, Gary clawed the binding twine loose from the top of the bag and kicked the bag over to spill out part of the sand. With a third of the sand removed, he tied the twine about the neck of the bag again and was able to twist the weight over his shoulder. Staggering, but somehow maintaining his balance, he made his way to the embankment, paused, started up. His knees buckled. But he held onto the bag, nor did it leave his shoulder. He bent forward until his face was close to the embankment and slowly lifted a knee

forward; another, another. Near the top, he had to wait until he could get enough breath into his lungs to go on the one remaining yard. He tried again—first his left knee, gained a few inches, then his right—he dug his left toe hard into the earth to keep from slipping back. His drenched hands began to slip on the twisted neck of the sack.

"No!" he ground out, and the slippage stopped.

His left knee again, the right. An inch at a time now. The river writhed and rushed by at a level with his eyes. On his right, the break had widened to two feet and down to a depth of several inches and was getting deeper by the second. Carefully now, painfully, he eased the sandbag lengthwise into the gap, only to see it settle until the river licked along a half-inch below the top of the insecure barrier. Gary stumbled down the embankment.

Another sandbag. Half-full this time for he knew he would never make the embankment with more. And still another. Now he had time to fill the bags instead of undoing the work he and Dave High had previously done. Knowing that his strength was ebbing, he reduced the load to a quarter. Trip after trip, and as the river ate at the earth where the sandbags and the embankment met he made height to each potential break. Numbly he noticed the sun going down. Smiling weakly, he thought of Dave High's ten minutes.

Hang an empty bag from the top of a fully-filled one and weight its mouth open there with another partly-filled bag. Dig in the shovel—lift. Ease the shovel into the nearly closed mouth of the sack, tilt. It was slow work, but it might—it just might—stop the levee from crashing through at this point.

The sun went down. The rain stopped. And then two strong hands were helping him. "You just hold, "said Dave High.

But there were other hands now. And voices. Many voices.

"Good work, son!" It was Bob Bristol's clipped voice. "Dave got us here as soon as he could, but we had troubles of our own for a time." He paused, peered closely at Gary in the deepening twilight. "You better rest a spell, son—campfire over there and some hot food. This job's under control and—"

A huge shadow loomed above them, and Tom Gettle asked, "This the man?"

"Right," Bristol answered.

"Good job." Gettle's strong, hard voice came through to Gary's weary senses. "You saved the levee. Folks out here don't forget things like that. Neither do I."

He turned and went lunging off into the darkness down the levee, a bull's-eye lantern in his hand. Bristol swung round to the sandbags. Weaving unsteadily, Gary Cortland walked a few yards toward the campfire, paused. His head seemed to be spinning, and all at once he could no longer see the campfire. He knew he must fall in another few seconds, but he said, "No!"

"It's all right to talk to yourself," said a girl's voice, and Peggy Bristol's strong arm was pulling him against her side as she walked. Strength seemed suddenly to flow into him; he could see the campfire now, but it seemed far away. The girl was walking slowly, and only too well he knew why. As he lifted and dragged each weak leg, he was ashamed—deeply, profoundly ashamed. He stopped suddenly—angry, defiant. Twisting his head around he said to the girl, "Would you mind—mind—if I made the rest of the way by myself?"

She looked at him steadily for a moment, not letting go her arm, and he saw a more sympathetic expression in her eyes, now luminous pools of reflected twilight. She smiled then, and the smile was good to see. The anger drained from him completely. Slowly she withdrew her arm, and he walked to the campfire, with the gait of a wounded animal. He grinned at her, and—tumbled headlong onto his face.

GARY CORTLAND was aware of a penetrating warmth on his face for a half minute or so before he could make up his mind to open his eyes. Even after he found himself staring into the high-leaping flames of a campfire, he had not the will to move either head or arm. Beyond the campfire was the Bristol buckboard, and still farther along the two horses, unharnessed, standing quietly tied to a cottonwood. On the buckboard

wheel closest to the fire, his coat was spread-eagled, steaming before the fire's radiating heat. On another wheel hung a pair of rawhide chaps. A smile spread slowly across Gary's lips and shaped into a broad grin. He chuckled.

"Oh, you're awake!" Peggy Bristol materialized from nowhere, but instantly he knew that she had been sitting quietly close behind him on a heap of burlap bags on which he now found himself lying and with some of which he had been comfortably covered. He tried to rise, but the girl said, "Wait!" He sank back, telling himself all this was a dream after a night with the boys, but when he opened his eyes everything was intensely real. He pondered the word—real, real, real. All this was real—satisfyingly real.

"Here's some coffee," the girl was saying. "Boiling hot—better just sip it."

He got a hand free of the encasing burlap and took the cup.

"Thank—I—I" Gary broke off, wondering if she knew the meaning of the word. Or was it an insult in this country to thank someone. He was beginning to realize that here thanks were neither given nor expected.

"Drink your coffee," the girl urged, and he found her voice friendly and warm. He wondered why he had thought her a cold person. In the firelight her blue eyes were green and her hair pure copper. He sipped his coffee. Twice he lifted the cup. On the third trip, he halted, suddenly aware that his hands were bandaged. He raised the cup and drained the hot liquid down to the coarse grounds settled at the bottom.

"There's some stew I saved for you. Try some?"

He would. And he grinned—he was beginning to like this country. As she ladled up the stew, he thought again of the very real world around him now, and he remembered something his father had once said, "Son, those folks out there are real. Go out some day and see. Everything's real—something you can get your mind into and hang onto. It's not just an imitation of life—I tell you it's real. I've been there and I know."

And so was his son, Gary Cortland. Yes, he was here all right—perforce! Thanks to certain bosom pals—no, not thanks, because you don't owe anybody thanks out here, and you'd be a fool to expect any. You just do your job as it comes your way, and everybody will be grateful, but they won't stop to thank you.

Without a word, he accepted the steaming, appetizing stew. A halved Irish potato sat in the middle of the dish, and Gary didn't care at all that it was not browned.

"That was a fine thing you did," Peggy Bristol said, booting the unburnt ends of some limbs into the fire.

Gary said nothing. For two reasons—one couldn't thank these folks and anyway his mouth was too full. He kept right on eating, and feeling better by the minute.

Gary tried to rise, suddenly embarrassed to have this girl waiting on him, but the girl said quickly, "Dad wants us to wait until he and Mr. Gettle come back. They're inspecting the levee downriver to make certain everything's all right." Nevertheless Gary began hauling himself erect.

"I'll get your shirt," said the girl.

Gary plopped back down. "Huh?" he grunted.

"Dad and Mr. Gettle got your wet clothes off while I cooked supper for everybody."

QUICKLY Gary pulled another burlap bag over what he now saw was an exposed torso. When some of the red had oozed out of his face, he began to grin. He said, "I have [illegible] charming friends I want you to meet some day." He watched her busying herself about a large wooden box into which she was stowing kitchen utensils. When she made no reply, he ventured, "My name's Cortland—Gary Cortland."

"So you told me."

"I—I—" he began, and smiled, remembering almost with violence their first meeting. "They call you Peggy. Are you—"

"Peggy Bristol. Bob Bristol's daughter." Her lips twitched. "I'm pleased to meet you," she added solemnly, but chuckled, and almost at once they were both laughing. After a moment she said, "I'm sorry!"

"Sorry? Why? It's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"What?"

"Meeting you."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I was thinking of the way I treated you."

"I'm glad," he said.

Nor did he explain, though a certain bright eagerness came into his eyes, and his cheeks were hard set. He asked, "Do you suppose your father could—would give me a job?"

When she didn't say anything, he hastily added, "Oh, I know I'm worthless—now. But I'd try hard—to learn."

She smiled, "You mean that?"

He nodded.

"I'll see," she said, glancing across to the levee. "Here come Mr. Gettle and Dad."

A few seconds later the two men thumped up to the fire and began scraping their boots against some small bushes to wipe off the thick levee-mud, but noticing that Gary was leaning on an elbow and watching them, Bristol said, "See you're feelin' better. We'll be—"

"Dad!" Peggy called. "I'm going home. Ginger's pawing his way through to China. I'll have the guest room ready for Mr. Cort—" her voice was lost in the thud of hoofs.

"If it's all the same to you, Mr. Bristol," said Gary, "I'd prefer the—what do you call the place where your men live?"

"Bunkhouse?" Bob Bristol gave him a searching glance. "Why, of course. It's up to you."

Tom Gettle said, "Here, I'll help you into the back of the buckboard. You'll be more comfortable there."

"I can ride in the seat," Gary protested, starting to rise, but when Gettle began hauling him up by an arm, Gary groaned and sweat broke out on his forehead.

Gettle said, "You're in no condition to ride in the seat, and I don't want to have to pick you up off the prairie." He half-lifted, half-rolled Gary into the bed of the buckboard and tossed him more burlap bags with which to cover himself. He fell into an exhausted, welcome sleep. . . .

JULY. Hot July on the range. Mud holes. Bogged steers. Work from four in the morning until nine at night. Thirsty, bawling cattle. Dust. Sweltering heat and sweating, sleepless nights. Gary learned how the nation's beef came to be.

One sweltering afternoon with the heat waves dancing giddily about them, Gary and Dave High stood for a moment looking down at a steer they had found bogged in the mud along the parched banks of the sluggish, scarcely moving Comanche.

"Well," said Gary, dismounting and shucking off his chaps. Dave tossed a loop over the steer's horns and snapped it tight all in the same motion. Gary gathered an armload of dried weeds and flung them onto the mud close by the steer's rear flank. Even so, as he walked out upon the insecure footing, his boots sank to his ankles.

"Ready!" Dave called, wrapping two coils of rope around his saddle horn. "Twist his tail!"

Gary grasped the steer's tail, made a single loop in it and crimped. At the same instant Dave spoke to his horse and the steer's neck stretched several inches, and with the sudden pain in tail and neck the steer made an all out effort to free himself, an effort he would never have made if left alone. With the steady pull of the horse, plus his own vigorous lunging, he floundered out of the dangerous mud trap. Dave eased his horse alongside and slipped the noose from the steer's horns. With an angry bellow, the animal leaped sidewise and, heels kicking high, crashed through a thicket of buckbush and headed for the herd.

"Better to have yore feelin's hurt, old feller," Dave High commented, "than die of starvation in that mud-hole. Let's go, Gary—probably more down at the bend."

With their horses at a steady canter, they had covered more than half the distance when someone called, "Gary! Hey, there—Gary!" They reined up short. Sitting quietly on Ginger in the shade of a live-oak tree, Peggy Bristol motioned for him to come to her.

"Uh-oh!" Dave chuckled. "The boss! Now what you-all done gone and done? See you later." Still chuckling, he trotted on downriver.

Peggy had dismounted when he rode up, and he promptly got down to join her. Grin-

ning, he said, "Whew!" and shoved his hat onto the back of his head. Peggy studied him a long time without speaking, a quizzical smile playing about her lips.

"Why all the mystery?" Gary asked, but waiting no answer said frankly, "Peggy, you're a lovely person. You know—"

"Now, now!" she opened her eyes wide, shoving her face toward him in mock-belligerence. "We've been through that a half-dozen times and—but about the mystery. Let's see your hands."

He gave her a questioning glance, but obediently raised his arms.

"Oh, turn your palms up!" she mock-scolded, and reaching out turned his palms

upward. She bent over to peer more closely. "Hmm?"

"Are you," he laughed, "by any means a fortune teller?"

"It doesn't take a gypsy to tell me what I want to see."

"Huh?"

She chuckled, "No blisters. Just callouses as hard as cow-horn." She looked up into his face. "Sunburnt, not paste-white." She let go one of his hands and jabbed a forefinger into an upper arm. "Hard as jerked beef," she said wryly, "and I would have been the last person to believe it possible."

"Thanks—I mean—"

She put two browned fingers over his lips. . . .

AUGUST. And still the thirsty cattle bawled. Buzzards soaring in great circles above the brush country beyond the railroad. Even the pain of thirst had not been sufficient to bring out the half-wild cows. They died. And their calves with them.

Gary, on the way to the barns after a trip of greasing windmills and cleaning spirogyra from watering tanks, turned in his saddle and looked down at the bone-dry bed of the Comanche. It was hard to believe that this seared gash in the earth had been a roaring torrent last spring.

He rode on. The sweet fragrance of alfalfa hay curing in the steady, beating sun. Wagons piled as high as a man could toss each forkful, moving across dusty stubble to and from mountainous haystacks. Barns bulging. Autumn right ahead and winter not far behind. Gary paused to watch a ranch hand toss a forkful atop a wagon being loaded by Dave High, who caught the hay and spread it evenly with a single deft semi-circular movement of his own pitchfork. The wagon loaded, the ranch hand walked away to an empty wagon waiting to be loaded.

"Guess I'll be goin'," Dave said, grasping up the lines and clucking the team into motion. "Two's company, three's—embarrassing." He grinned as he bobbed about on the weaving wagon.

The slow, rhythmic beat of hoofs brought Gary erect in the saddle, but he waited until Peggy cantered slowly across the stubble to him. She called out impishly, "Hi, cowpoke!" As Ginger stopped in an overlap with Gary's own mount, Gary patted the animal on his nose. He said, "Peggy, you're a lovely picture! I'm going to miss you."

The gay, carefree smile faded from the girl's face. She looked up at him with suddenly frozen face. Her blue eyes caught the afternoon sun, and all the intensity of the depths of a Western summer sky reflected in her gaze. She started to speak, her lips forming words, but no voice coming. She didn't try again.

He said, "Peggy!" And himself couldn't say any more. Not for long moments, while he bent suddenly closer, looking down upon her face. A hand crept quite without his will toward that one of hers which held the reins

against the pommel. He said, "Peggy!" again, but added, "I didn't—didn't know you cared whether I staved or went."

She looked steadily into his eyes, and slowly her smile returned. "Gary Cortland!" she stormed, impishness returning to her face. "You're either a liar or plain dumb. I've chased you all over the range from June to September—well, almost—and I'm just another cowhand to you. I don't ask questions, and I keep everybody else from doing it—including Dad. I hover around you like a mother hen—and it makes no impression. I work cows with you, ride fence, pitch hay, break stubble—talk by the hour in the moonlight. And you have the nerve to tell me you didn't know I cared! Oh, you sweet liar!"

When consciousness came to both of them minutes later, Dave High was just driving the wagon up beside the haystack. He began to whistle, very low, but very sweet, and at first neither Gary nor Peggy could make out the tune, though both realized that they were listening. Raising her cheek from Gary's shoulder and twisting about a little in his arm, Peggy looked up into Gary's eyes. She spoke throatily, "Dave! And chirping like a cricket!"

Gary smiled, "Mendelssohn's wedding march." And he kissed her again. . . .

SEPTEMBER. And the rains came. The Comanche, viscous with chocolate-colored mud, writhed and boiled. It hissed a song of destruction at the levee, and Tom Gettle impressed every man on the range to stand by. Although the summer's work had raised the height of the levee to a safety margin, a new danger loomed—water pressure created giant sandboils beyond the levee itself, threatening to undermine the entire structure.

Gary paused from weighting brush into a large sandboil. He glanced at Peggy sitting on Ginger and holding his own mount for him when he should be free to go. Tom Gettle came up, face flushed. Noticing the waiting Peggy, he roared, "You've got your nerve, Peggy Bristol! Takin' my men—"

"You wouldn't spoil my very own wedding, now would you, Tom?" Peggy broke in. "I've got to take Gary along to the big city to help me buy wedding things."

"This river's not letting down—it's getting worse," Tom Gettle growled. "By the minute." He glanced along the levee. "Hey, you there, put some meat behind that shovel! Peggy, if you take Gary, you've got to send me two men to replace him." He stalked off, a shovel in each hand.

Gary called after him, "It's a promise!"

Peggy said, "What?"

"Oh, sweet mystery of life!" he began, but—

"Gary Cortland, you're holding out on me!" And as he swung up into his saddle and trotted off, "Ever since that mysterious 'phone call you made yesterday." But he had put his horse to a gallop and later when Ginger was able to pound up abreast, she could see it would do her no good to try to pin down the grinning Gary.

The next morning, Peggy, waiting for her father and Gary to come to breakfast pulled her eyebrows together when she heard them talking as they came along the walk.

"So, sir," said Gary, "if it's all right with you?"

"It's all right," her father replied. "Quite all right."

"My mother will take good care of her," said Gary.

Barring the way at the kitchen door, Peggy said suspiciously, "And just whose destiny are you two settling? Would that 'her' by any chance mean me?"

"Looks like rain," Bob Bristol chuckled.

"It is raining!" Peggy flung back, but Bristol edged into the kitchen, leaving Gary to make explanation.

"Well," said Gary, "it's this way—oh, Peggy!"

When he released her, he asked, "Could you get ready to catch the nine-fifteen?"

She studied his face a few moments. "Are you serious?" But seeing that he was, "Mr. Cortland, did you ever know a ranch woman who wasn't ready to go with her man at the drop of a hat?"

"I," Gary replied, "have only known one ranch woman."

He got a suitable reward for this, and

when she could, she said, "Eat your breakfast. I've had mine." She spun around and raced across the room to the inner kitchen door. Gary, smiling, heard her footsteps thumping up to her room. He joined Bristol at the table.

They had scarcely finished when Peggy reappeared, carrying two bags. Gary rose, mouth half-open, staring. Bob Bristol laid down his fork with a clatter. Gary finally told the smiling girl, "Why go to the big city to buy anything when—when—"

Peggy said, "A woman has to have many new things for her wedding, or hadn't you heard?"

Dave High appeared at the doorway. "Buckboard's ready."

When they were seated, Gary kicked off the brake and the team lunged away. He said, "Just for old times' sake, I'd like to drive over by the railroad near the water tank—where I first met you and—"

"The cow!" she sighed, leaning against him, but almost at once asked, "What's that?"

She had straightened and was looking down at a small parcel at the bottom of the buckboard.

"I had my motion picture camera mailed to me a few weeks ago. Thought I'd like to take a few shots of the river and the boys."

They stopped near the place where Gary had watched her brand the calf, but Gary took so long with his pictures that finally she called to him, "Gary, we'll have to hurry! We've just barely got time to make it now!"

He came over to her then. With a grin, "I've decided to flag the limited here."

"You wouldn't dare! They'd be so mad they wouldn't let you on."

"Mind if we chance it?"

"No, I suppose not, but—Gary Cortland, what are you up to?"

"We'll chance it, then. Now, if you don't mind, we'll drive over to the levee. I'd like a few shots of the fellows at work there."

He turned the team that way, and Peggy said, "You didn't answer my question?"

"I want a picture of the boys," he chuckled, added, "At work."

RANGE TIDBITS

Hollywood's most traveled actor, Ray Milland, journeyed only 650 miles from home base to discover the most impressive scenery in America. That is what Ray Milland calls the mountains and cliffs and desert expanses around Kanab, Utah, where he spent some time recently making a new western movie. Says Milland: "The Bay of Naples is beautiful, so are the Austrian Alps and the Cotswold country of England. But for the kind of beauty that makes a man's pulse pound, give me Kanab!"

•

Actor Arthur Kennedy, generally considered a mild man, is enjoying the plaudits of a group of the west's toughest cowpokes because at his own insistence, he successfully rode a wild Brahma bull for the final scene in his new movie, a rodeo story. For the ride, the assembled cowboys made Kennedy an honorary member of the Rodeo Cowboys Association, only the third such honorary membership ever given out in the long history of the organization.

■

Not that we want to disillusion you, but when you see Actor Kirk Douglas and others in his new western movie cross the stony Snake River in Wyoming, they'll actually be wading on rugs. The floor of the sharp-rocked river was carpeted with thick matting to prevent any possible injury to the actors.

■

Cowboy Star Gene Autry foresakes his western attire for only two occasions: formal evening and golf. Autry is probably the only Western star who keeps a private phone wire open from Los Angeles during the filming of his pictures on location. Gene's many business interests outside of pictures make it imperative for him to be in touch with all parts of the country at all times.

By Harold Helfer

BEFORE he had finished taking motion picture scenes of the river and the men at work on the levee, the limited whistled, slowed, stopped at the water-tank siding.

"It never did that before," Peggy said, plainly puzzled. "Look! There's a passenger car on the siding. They're—they're going to hook onto it. Why, it's—it's one of those brass-railed cars the railroad officials ride in. I've seen them on the end of trains hundreds of times."

"Maybe," said Gary noncommitally, suddenly turning the team about and putting them to a fast trot, "some official business is afoot."

They had not yet reached the railroad, or the "Place of the Cow," as Peggy put it, when the train huffed down the track and coasted to a stop with the brass-railed car almost directly in front of them. Gary drove on up to the right-of-way fence. "Quick!" he said, "Now's our chance!"

Quickly tying the team back to the seat with the lines, he helped her from the buckboard. Peggy started to comment about the fence being down at that place, but he gave her no chance to talk. Nor did she have time to ask why the tall grass had been cut away at that particular spot. More puzzled each second, she had no time to think upon one odd circumstance before another popped up. And when two men in evening clothes appeared on the rear of the brass-railed car, she gave up trying to think at all. She had the numb feeling that she and Gary were getting into something where they didn't belong, but Gary was urging her along as he followed with her bags, saying, "Right back here. This end car. No, not the front steps—the rear. That's it—up we go."

He tossed her bags onto the platform at the very feet of the young men so ludicrously and immaculately clad in evening attire, the very rig that Gary had appeared in when she was branding the—wait a minute, she thought, and glanced at Gary, who was now helping her up the steps.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" said Gary, so solemn-faced as to be totally unlike him. "Good morning, merry gentlemen!"

Peggy saw that both of them were staring blankly at Gary's worn ranch clothes, from the scuffed boots to the torn blue shirt and the battered hat Dave High had lent him. Peggy never felt more out of place in all her life, but she could not protest, for she had only a dry tongue and no voice.

"So," one of the men began.

"This explains," a second continued, bowing with severe solemnity from the waist.

"Why we," the first chimed in.

"Got sidetracked yesterday," both said together, "without food or drink, having been—" they paused, looked from one to the other, went on, "shanghaied from our very hearthstones by chicanery and ruse and put aboard this prison car while in a state of—"

"Inebriateness," finished Gary. "Plain drunkenness, Peggy—two of my bosom pals—Sam Wells on the right, Bob Branton on the left. Pals one never forgets. Now, the photographs."

He busied himself with his camera.

"What photographs?" asked Bob Branton.

"Who said anything about photographs?" Sam Wells wanted to know.

"I did," said Gary. "Sort of wedding photographs—something to remember. I'm getting married."

The two looked at each other. Branton said, "It's affected his mind. We shouldn't have done it."

"And just to think," Sam Wells added, "we caused it all. I knew we shouldn't have shipped him out that night. It'll be on my conscience the rest of my life."

PEGGY turned to Gary, who was smiling down at her. She sucked in the corner of her lower lip and squinted narrowly at him. He spoke hurriedly, "The pictures, gentlemen. Pray, do not be so alarmed for my sake. And as for your conscience—*tsk! tsk!* Peggy, would you mind stepping down and joining the boys in a group photograph? Thank you, this way—come, boys."

He arranged them in the middle of the track. "Now, Peggy, you stand here. You fellows—back about here—I want to get the water tank in the background. Maybe I can even include the men working on the levee. No, boys, way on back. There—that'll do.

Hold it."

He climbed onto the platform again. "First, a picture of Peggy with you in the background, then I want Peggy to come up here while I get a few shots of you coming toward the car. Ready, put on your best smiles. Who knows, you might not smile for a long time to come—ready, good! Now, Peggy, up here!"

When she gained the platform, "All right—I want to catch you boys moving into the picture from the distance. Back a little farther—more yet. Hold it! No, about twenty feet more."

Bewildered, Peggy watched, a slow-dawning, increasing understanding coming to her. For one thing, Gary seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. His face was controlled with effort, and he seemed to be ready to break out into loud laughter. She saw him reach up swiftly, then, and pull the end of the train's signal cord.

With the first tremendous chuff-chuff of the engine, the two men in evening suits lunged forward. Gary raised his camera and began to record the scene. The train gathered speed. The engineer seemed to be making an especial effort to see how quickly he could get under way. The two men began to shout. Gary, grinning from ear to ear, kept his camera focused, and Peggy could hear the little gears of the camera purring steadily away.

"Faster!" Gary shouted. "We want this to be good. You'll look back on this film, boys, with keen interest in the years to come. Faster! The train's getting away from you. You're losing, boys! Step on it! Atta boys! You're shore measurin' distance—just in case you don't make it, boys, go down to the levee and ask for Tom Gettle—get the name, Tom Gettle—he's in charge. Tell him I sent you—tell him you're the two men I talked to him about. Hear me? Can you hear—" He kept on grinding as the train gathered speed.

The two men stopped, and together shook their clenched fists.

"A beautiful fade-out!" Gary half-whispered.

"B-b-but," Peggy stammered, "I don't—don't understand."

He pressed a buzzer, and when a white-jacketed porter appeared, "Put the lady's things in the guest stateroom. I'll use Dad's room across the aisle."

"Yes *sir*, Mister Cortland," the porter said with a grin.

Gary turned to the bewildered Peggy, "You'll understand someday," he said.

"Right now I don't quite understand it all myself. But this I do know—My father always told me I'd find real people out West. I didn't ever think I'd have to be shanghaied on his railroad to find out what he meant, though. But now, thanks to one sweet Peggy Bristol—er—Cortland, I do."

Peggy came to him then, face upraised. "Won't you ever, Gary Cortland," she said in a choked voice, "learn not to say 'thanks' out here?" And he couldn't have then, had he wanted to, for her lips wouldn't let him.

For the Brightest and Latest in Western Music News

Read

RANGELAND RECORDS

By PAT JONES

•

Your Guide to the Newest and Best Cowboy Discs

Every Issue in This Magazine!

RANGELAND RECORDS

Pee Wee King Hits the Jackpot

ONCE UPON a hoedown, there was a fiddler's son, but he preferred the harmonica and the accordion to the violin. Asked why, Pee Wee King, the nation's top Western bandleader, is likely to grin, "I guess I like squeezin' better than scrapin'."

Because Pee Wee, who was christened Frank, was the son of a man whose fiddling was the high spot of local events around Abrams, Wisconsin, his mother wanted him to study the violin seriously. When he was only ten years old he entered an amateur contest, playing the harmonica. That first time, the diminutive contestant was referred to as "Pee Wee" and the name has stuck so that he's now taken it legally as his middle name. When he won the contest, he spent his prize money on the violin his mother was so anxious for him to own.

But in between practising arpeggios, Pee Wee kept up his paper route until he had enough money saved to buy the accordion for which he had long had a secret yen.

About then the King family moved to Milwaukee where Pee Wee went to high school and organized his first four-piece band. The music was heard all the way out in Racine, and Pee Wee was asked if he'd like to make an appearance on a Racine radio station. Would he! He jumped at the chance, and as luck would have it, when Gene Autry was passing through town a couple of weeks later, he was looking for an accordionist. Somebody remembered Pee Wee, and that is how he got his start in a western band.

After touring with Autry, Pee Wee joined the Log Cabin Boys in Louisville, Kentucky. There was something about the country—the people and the music—that appealed to him, and Pee Wee decided to stay in Louisville on his own. Soon after, the organization that became famous as the Golden West Cowboys was formed. They worked around Louisville for a while, and then took a job with the famous "Grand Ole Opry" in Nashville. They stayed there for ten years. During this time, Pee Wee made his first movie, "Gold Mine in the Sky," with his old friend Gene Autry.

In order to keep up with the demands for the band's public appearances, the boys have had to swap the cowboy's traditional means of transportation for something more up-to-date. The saddle has been replaced by a twin-motored, ten-passenger plane which Pee Wee owns in partnership with a friend. "As rough as any bronco," one of his boys observed after a particularly bumpy trip.

Not only has Pee Wee hit the musical jackpot with his talent as a musician and a bandleader, but in collaboration with Redd Stewart, his featured vocalist, and Chilton Price of Station WAVE, he has written some of the nation's top tunes, country style. So popular were his TENNESSEE WALTZ, SLOW POKE, BONAPARTE'S RETREAT and YOU BELONG TO ME that they were recorded by such a variety of artists as Patti Page, Gene Krupa, Arthur Godfrey, Kay Starr, Art Mooney, Roberta Lee, Helen O'Connell and Ralph Flanagan.

Pee Wee actually set out to give country music the wide appeal he knew it deserved. He hit upon the idea of combining the country feeling of a danceable rhythm with simple, straightforward lyrics. As the popu-

larity of his tunes attests, Pee Wee has the right idea.

Redd Stewart, his vocalist-collaborator, has been with King for twelve years, and as far as Pee Wee's concerned, he's one of the family. There's just one point where the two fail to see eye-to-eye. One favors the use of the word "sweetheart," the other "darling" in their lyrics. They will argue over the propriety of each word in their songs. With cries of "Sweetheart!" and "Darling!" going back and forth, it sounds like a lovers spat, "But as it works out," they agree," we'll just have to keep on writin' songs to keep each other happy."

A tribute to Pee Wee's loyalty and easy-going ways is the fact that for seven years the personnel of his band has remained the same. Gene Stewart, Redd's brother, sings and plays bass fiddle. Fiddler Shorty Boyd and guitarist Church Wiggins do a comedy routine. Pee Wee considers Sticks McDonald the best Western drummer in the business. Gene Engle plays piano, Bob Koefer the steel guitar, and Terry Tichy the electric guitar. Bob Kay, who works as announcer on all Pee Wee's WAVE shows, doubles in character and comedy roles. "These are the boys who make the show," he is the first to tell you, "and they deserve the credit."

Pee Wee's given a boost to many solo artists in the country music field, among them Eddy Arnold, Ernie Tubb and Minnie Pearl.

Pee Wee and his family live in a colonial house in Louisville, but he and his wife are now looking for a farm. Time was when the thought of chores and music didn't mix too well, but now he needs the room for his large family—daughter Marietta Jo, son Frank Jr., and twins Larry and Gene. Besides, Pee Wee's hobby of riding and training trick horses is more appropriate on a farm! Mrs. King laughs and says that he needs as much room for his fabulous collection of Western duds as he does for his horses. Pee Wee defends himself by saying that if he doesn't change his costume often enough, his television audience is disappointed.

With his many radio and television appearances, his recording for *RCA Victor*, his movie contract with *Columbia Pictures* and his personal appearances as well, Pee Wee still takes an active interest in local affairs.

He belongs to all the business men's clubs: Rotarians, Lions, Lambs, but he declined the presidency of the local Kiwanis. He figured he was in the spotlight enough, and being out of town as often as he was he didn't think it fair to accept the honor and let someone else do the work. Much of his spare time has been donated to the Cerebral Palsy Fund which aids in the rehabilitation of spastic children. "Give the kids who can't enjoy a breakdown a break," is a slogan well worth remembering.

And that's the story of Pee Wee King, the little guy whose made a big success of country music. —*Pat Jones*

RANGELAND RECORD ROUND-UP

YOU fans who like the music of Pee Wee King will want to add THE CRAZY WALTZ and TENNESSEE TANGO on *Victor* to your country music collections.

Hank Williams sings his heart out on MGM disc. I COULD NEVER BE ASHAMED OF YOU. On the same label, Arthur (Guitar Boogie) Smith covers a lot of territory with SOUTH and LADY OF SPAIN.

The Weavers have done a swell job of two more old favorites on *Decca*. They're TRUE LOVE and CLEMENTINE.

If it's waltzes and polkas you have a yen for, Fezz Fritsche and his Goosetown Band are willing to oblige on *MGM* with BEAUTIFUL YOUTH and the SUSIE POLKA.

Hank Snow, no fool where country music is concerned, offers A FOOL SUCH AS I and THE GAL WHO INVENTED KISSIN' on *Victor*.

A new folk singer to watch is Al Britt who makes a fine contribution on *MGM* with ONE LITTLE TEARDROP TOO LATE and WISHING RING.

You won't let your phonograph drag for long if you have Loyd Weaver's *Coral* waxing of ONE WHEEL DRAGGIN'.

Guy Mitchell's *Columbia* LP album SONGS OF THE OPEN SPACES is tops.

He had been a boy with a big decision to make—

now he was a man and let his gun do his talking

HE RODE into the yard one morning and asked John Hackett for a job. He was young, lean and supple, with a grim set to his jaw, an air of desperation as he waited for John's answer.

"Not much doing since branding," John told him. "You try any of the big outfits?"

"I tried 'em all."

"Well, I'm putting up fence right now, and could use a hand. All right. We'll see how it works out. What's your name?"

"Lee Higgins."

"You new in the country?"

The young man shook his head, his lips tight together. He looked straight at John and said, "I'll tell you now, before you find out for yourself and think I took advantage of you. And if you want to change your mind about that job, all right." He paused. "I just got out of the pen."

"That why none of the other outfits would hire you?"

"I reckon that's the reason."

John squinted at the hills and did some thinking. He'd only settled here two years before, and he hated to make a fool of himself by hiring a man who had been turned down by all the other ranchers. On the other hand, the fellow was being honest with him, and that counted for something.

"I said we'd see how it works out, and that's what we'll do. You got the bunkhouse to yourself—"

The back door had opened and shut, and Lee was looking past him. Judy smiled from the steps, and the young man was looking at her as if he hadn't seen a pretty eighteen-year-old girl for a long time.

John's face hardened. Judy was all the family he had since Martha's death, and he wasn't about to stand by and let an ex-con stare at her in that way. He put himself between Lee and the house.

"We'll just get this one thing straight right now," he said, his voice low and dangerous. "Keep away from Judy. The first time I catch you making a move I'll run you off the place so fast you'll wish you had wings. Is that understood?"

Lee flushed. "Yes."

John looked at him a moment longer with his hard gray eyes. He told Lee to put

Lee's gun shattered and Bob fell back

JUDY

CHOICE

By J. L. Bouma

his horse up and come in to breakfast, and he drank a cup of coffee while Lee ate hurriedly, his eyes on his plate. Judy frowned at John as if to ask what this was all about, but John looked back wooden-faced and sat right there until Lee had finished eating. Then he told Lee to hitch the wagon and load it with the wire and fence posts he'd find alongside the barn.

Lee went out, and Judy said, "What's the matter, Pa? You might at least have introduced us."

"You're not to have anything to do with him, and I mean that."

"Then why'd you hire him?"

"I opened my mouth and put my foot in it," John said. He told her Lee had been in prison, and he added grimly. "He won't be here long because I aim to work him so hard he'll quit before the end of the month. Meanwhile, you'll forget that he's on the place."

"The way you talk you'd think I already took an interest in him," Judy flared.

John grinned faintly, for he was proud of the fact that Judy had a mind of her own. So far, the only man she'd shown a speck of interest was Bob Loughery, who owned Ladder. But she didn't seem too serious about him, and John liked that fine. He couldn't work up much enthusiasm for young Loughery, who had inherited Ladder on old Ward Loughery's death the year before. Bob thought a little too much of himself to suit John as a possible son-in-law.

"I reckon you'll know when the right one comes along," John said dryly, and Judy was laughing as he went out to see how Lee was getting along.

JOHN knew after the first week that he'd never work Lee hard enough to make him quit. He himself was hard to beat when it came to turning out a day's work, but Lee had it all over him. Lee was like a hungry man who can't get his fill. He did all and more than John told him to do, and he did it right. John couldn't help but admire the young man. A top hand if I ever saw one, he thought.

He minded what John had told him about keeping away from Judy, too. He'd come to meals in time to sit down and start eating, and as soon as he'd finished he'd get up and go out to the bunkhouse, or maybe do some extra chores before dark.

"I don't like the way we're treating him," Judy said one evening. "It's lonely in the bunkhouse by himself. We could at least ask him into the parlor after supper."

"We could, but we're not going to." John thumbed tobacco into his pipe. He scratched a match and puffed moistily. "Tomorrow is Saturday. We'll go to town early and stock up on supplies. Remind me to get a gallon of red paint. I want a coat on the barn before the weather turns bad."

"Bob is coming by to take me to the dance."

John grunted and went into the parlor. He lit a lamp and settled in his favorite chair with his weekly paper. That's when he heard the rider stop out front. It was Jackson, the deputy sheriff. John asked him inside and brought out the brandy bottle and a box of cigars. They passed the time of day. Jackson sipped his brandy and worried the cigar with his back teeth. "Hear you got Lee Higgins working for you. Did you know that he's been in the pen?"

"He told me."

"And you still hired him? Man, that's foolish."

"Next time I hire a man I'll come and ask you first," John said in a dry voice. He paused. "What he do to get sent up?"

"Hell, he tried to rob old Ward Loughery—" Jackson got up as Judy came in, and he grinned at her. "Still the prettiest girl in the county. How are you, Judy?"

"Peaches and cream," Judy said. She sat down on the sofa, smiling at the deputy. "How's Mrs. Jackson?"

"Fine, thanks." The deputy sat down. "I come over figuring John didn't know about Higgins. Thought I'd better tell him."

"I heard you say he tried to rob Mr. Loughery," Judy said, ignoring John's frown. "How did it happen?"

"Ward took him in when he was a button. His folks homesteaded up there above Ladder, and they took fever and died within a month of each other. Ward liked the boy, and raised him as a second son."

"Funny Bob never mentioned him."

"Well, they didn't get along, and after what happened I guess both Bob and the old man were glad enough to forget him."

"Just what did happen?" John asked, curious now.

"Ward sold some cows for cash one day to Keller, over at Rainbow Creek. Got five thousand dollars and meant to bank it next day. First I knew of it, Ward come in with both boys and went straight to the courthouse where he charged Lee with attempted robbery. It come out at the trial that Lee had taken the money from Ward's desk, and that Bob had caught him just in time. Had quite a fight, and old Ward was mad as a hornet, having raised this boy, and then the boy turning right around and trying to steal from him.

"Judge Mitchell gave him five years. Still a wonder to me he came back here, and I can't say I like it. I don't think he'd've stayed around if you hadn't hired him, John. All the ranchers are dead set against him, and you can't blame 'em. I'd get rid of him if I were you."

"I figure to let him work the month out," John said. "Don't seem right running him off the place when he just got here."

"Well, I should think not!" Judy said. "He's a good worker, and you know it, Pa. He deserves a chance. He probably came back here for that very reason, to make up for the wrong he's done. So let's not talk of running him off the place."

Jackson grinned at John, who said flatly, "I'll decide that."

"Well, I'd watch him while he's here," the deputy said. He got up and reached for his hat. "Good night, Judy."

John followed the deputy out on the porch. "Does Bob know he's working here?"

"I don't know, John." Jackson put a booted toe in the stirrup and swung up, the saddle creaking as it took his weight. "Bob still calling on Judy?"

"He does," John said shortly.

"Well, he's got him a nice ranch," Jackson said. "Thanks for the cigar and the drink, John." He touched his hat and reined out of the yard.

As John turned to go inside, he saw the glow of a cigarette at the side of the porch, and he recognized Lee's lanky shape. He said curtly, "Eavesdropping?"

"No," Lee said in as curt a voice. He added, "I guess Jackson told you about me."

"He told me. You got anything to add?"

Lee sighed, and the words dragged. "I guess not."

The door opened behind John. He heard the rustle of Judy's dress, but he didn't turn around. To Lee he said, "In that case figure on looking for another job at the end of the month."

"Now wait a minute, Pa—" Judy began.

"Get in the house," John said, and he waited until she'd done as she was told. Then he said, "You hear me, Higgins?"

"Sure, sure," Lee said in a low voice. He was looking at the window, where Judy stood, the lamplight framing her honey-colored hair. He looked at her for a long moment before flipping his smoke away and turning to the bunkhouse, his shoulders slumped.

Judy gave John one angry glance as he entered the house. Then she ran to her room. He swore mildly and took up his newspaper, but it was a long time before he could concentrate on what he was reading.

JOHN and Judy returned from town late the next afternoon and found Lee busy cleaning out the corral. Judy hurried in the house to start supper and Lee unloaded their supplies. John carried the gallon of paint to the barn, afterwards helping Lee unhitch and put the team up. He told Lee gruffly that he could draw a few dollars if he meant to go into town that evening, but Lee said no thanks.

"Suit yourself," John said. He looked at Lee with his hard gray eyes. "Bob Loughery is coming by for Judy this evening. Thought I'd tell you because I have an idea you won't be wanting to see him."

Lee flushed. "I've never yet run from a man, and I don't intend to start now."

"All right. But mind your manners. I don't want trouble in my house."

Bob called for Judy while they were still

at the supper table. They all heard the buggy roll up, and then Bob soft-footed through the front door the way he always did. It was one of the things John didn't like about him, and he wasn't smiling welcome when Bob appeared silently in the kitchen doorway.

Judy said, "Hello, Bob," and young Loughery grunted. John watched Lee get up slowly, standing a head taller than Bob, who was pudgy for so young a man. Bob had a smooth moon face, and in his town suit with the heavy gold watch chain across his ample middle, looked more like a banker than he did a cattleman.

There wasn't much to see on his face when he saw Lee. The two men looked at each other in stony silence. Bob broke it finally. "You sure got your nerve coming back here."

Lee just kept looking straight at Bob, who slowly reddened under that flat stare. He said angrily, "Who the hell you think you're looking at?"

John said, "You're in my house, Bob."

"I'd just as soon get out while he's here."

"That's a fine way to talk!" Judy said, her cheeks pink.

"Never mind, Miss Judy." He was still looking at Bob, a faint amusement in him now. Then he smiled at Judy. "Fine supper," he murmured, and went out.

Judy turned on Bob, her cheeks still pink. "Next time you talk that way to Lee you can just find some other girl to take out."

He scowled at her. "You sticking up for a thief?"

"He spent five years in jail. It seems to me that's enough punishment. And if you were any kind of a man you'd welcome him back instead of—"

"Well, now, if that ain't something!" Bob Loughery said venomously. "Fine thing." He paused, then added gruffly, "You gonna get ready for the dance, or not?"

"I changed my mind," Judy said coldly. "I'm not going."

"You can't do that—"

"Hah!" Judy said.

Bob, his face red, said hurriedly, "Then how about the picnic tomorrow after church? We were going on a picnic."

"Come by for me and we'll see," Judy said in that cold voice, and left the room.

Bob repeated gruffly, "Well, now, if that ain't something." He stared sullenly at the floor. "Higgins been telling you lies?"

John frowned. "Lies?"

"I mean about what happened."

"Told me nothing," John said. "I heard about it from Jackson. What do you mean about telling lies?"

"Nothing, I guess." The young cattleman gave a crooked little smile. "I never did trust him, and wouldn't put it past him to make up a story about robbing Dad."

"Kinda late for that, ain't it? If there'd been anything for him to say, he'd've said it at his trial, wouldn't he?"

"Sure. Well, good night, John. I sure hope that girl is in better humor tomorrow."

Bob went out to his buggy and drove away. John grinned at Judy as she came back to the kitchen.

"And him the best catch in the county."

Judy sighed. "I know, but I don't like him much. It makes me gloomy when I think of spending the rest of my life with him." She started to clear the table, saying absently, "I guess I'm not very practical. A practical girl would jump at the chance to marry him."

"Well, don't fret," John said. "It ain't what he's got to offer that counts. Your Ma and I never had it easy, but we were always happy, and that's the main thing."

AT MEAL times during the days that followed, John noticed that Lee looked at Judy more than was necessary, and that Judy would blush each time their eyes met. She took to singing around the house, looking flushed and happy, and these unmistakable signs worried John more than ever. He wished the end of the month would hurry up and roll around so he could send Lee on his way.

At supper Wednesday evening, Judy said something about a party at the Richter ranch, and that Bob was taking her. Lee got up shortly after that and went out. When John stepped into the twilight smoking his pipe, he found that Lee had saddled his

horse and was riding out of the yard.

A little evening breeze whispered through the elms that lined the lane. John walked as far as the road and looked along it to the rise just as Lee topped it, then turned his horse into the brush.

John frowned. He started back to the house, but half-way there crossed the lane and took off across the field. It took him about five minutes of fast walking to draw even with the rise, and from there he worked toward the road.

In the distance he heard trotting hoofs, the rim sound of Bob's buggy. Then, directly ahead of him, a horse walked through the brush; a moment later he saw Lee and the horse silhouetted against the evening sky. Then Lee spoke, the buggy stopped, and John took a few cautious steps forward. When he halted, it was to hear Lee say, "Can't tonight. Some business came up I got to take care of." Bob picked up the reins and rolled out of the yard. John went inside. Judy was in the parlor wearing her new green dress. She pouted at him.

"I did want to go to the party, but Bob couldn't make it He has to go to town to meet a cattle buyer."

"Too bad," John murmured. He heard a horse go on past the house, and he went outside. Lee was unsaddling at the corral, whistling softly to himself as he worked. He opened the corral gate and turned the horse loose, then carried the saddle and bridle and the saddle blanket into the barn.

John waited till he came outside. Then he said, "I don't know as I take kindly to you choosing my daughter's friends."

Lee ceased his whistling and stopped short. He said, "Ah," on a long breath.

• • •

SPEEDY JUSTICE

Jim Barnett, one-time Justice of the Peace in the vicinity of Tombstone, arrested many men on the street and in bars. He held court there and then, pronounced sentence and pocketed the fines.

—Fred Harvey

• • •

". . . not taking her any place. Make up your mind about that."

"You think you can stop me?" Bob Loughery said angrily.

"I can sure as hell take you apart if you don't do like I say. Now suppose you go tell her you can't take her. I don't give a damn what excuse you use, but tell her."

"You're gonna push me too far one of these days—"

"Far enough to shove you out of the country," Lee said curtly. "Now move, damn you!"

Bob cursed, the buggy rolled, and Lee sat his horse and watched. Then he reined left and trotted on up the road.

When John reached his house he found Bob just coming outside. Bob got in the buggy and John walked over to it and said, "Thought you were taking Judy to Richter's party?"

"Yeah, 'Ah'," John said. "Now let's get on with it. What's it all about? Why should Bob mind you when you tell him you don't want him seeing Judy?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Maybe not. Then again maybe it's worth telling."

"I've never told anyone," Lee said in a distant voice. "But I guess I owe you an answer, so here it is if you care to listen." He paused. "Bob took that money. We was both eighteen at the time, and he was fixing to run away. I caught him in Ward's office with the money in his hand, and I tried to talk sense to him. He pulled a gun on me, and I wrestled it and the money away from him just as Ward came in. Well, Bob yelled thief—"

"You crazy damn fool, if that's the truth, why didn't you speak up?"

"Because of the look on Ward's face.

I saw right away that he believed Bob, and I knew it'd be twice as bad for him if he learned the truth. He'd raised me, so I made a choice, figuring Ward would run me off the place, and I could take that. But he was madder than I thought, so when he filed charges against me I had to take that too. By that time it was cut and dried, and shifting the blame would only have made it worse."

"Why'd you come back here?"

LEE gave a harsh chuckle. "I heard Ward had died, so I came back to kill Bob. Five years is a long time to spend behind bars, and I wanted him dead. I had the chance one night in town. He was in the saloon, and I knew that all I would have to do was go in there and call him a thief and liar, but I couldn't do it. I got as far as the door, and then something told me it would be murder, because I'm pretty fast with a gun.

"So then I thought of another way. I would get a job around here, and I would see him. Maybe out on the range, maybe in town, and I planned it that every time we met I'd just look at him until he had to do something about it. So you hired me and I found he was going with Judy, and I didn't like it a damn bit. She's too good for him. That's why I told him to keep away from her." Lee sighed. "Well, that's it. You can believe it or not, but it's the truth."

John didn't say anything right away. Maybe these were the lies Bob had said Lee might tell. But Lee didn't sound like a liar. And there was the undeniable fact that Bob had heeded Lee's orders to break the date with Judy.

"I take it, then, that he's still afraid you'll talk."

"That's mostly it, I suppose. Not that it would do me any good, not now, and there wouldn't be much point in it, either. It sure wouldn't give me back the five years I spent up there at that place." He paused and looked at John. "You believe me?"

"I can't see where it matters," John said. "You're branded, boy. "And unless you can get Bob to confess, you'll stay branded. If I was you I'd leave here and start over at some new place."

Lee laughed softly. He turned to the bunkhouse, then turned again. He said, "You know, John, I don't think you would. . . ."

That was on Wednesday. Friday night, the flat cracks of three shots jerked John from sleep.

He had his pants and boots on, his gun in his hand before he was wide awake, and a minute later he was outside and peering around in the dim darkness. There was a light shining from the bunkhouse window, and he went there and looked inside. Lee was standing over his bunk wearing his his long handles. John went to the door.

"What the hell happened—" He broke off because someone appeared to be asleep in the bunk. Lee grinned at him. He pulled the blankets back, revealing two sacks of grain. He poked a finger in a hole, and a little grain spilled out.

"Glad it wasn't me," he said dryly. He nodded his head at the corner, where a rumpled blanket lay on a tarpaulin. "I figured he just might try something like this, so I've been sleeping on the floor. And darned if he didn't!"

John gave him a hard look. He went over to where Lee's holstered gun hung from its wall peg, and he sniffed the muzzle. Lee grinned at him tightly. "Satisfied?"

John grunted. "You sure it was him?"

"Who else? Look—" Lee pointed at the window above the bunk. The bottom pane was broken. "He must've known where the bunk was located, so all he had to do was poke his gun through and let fly."

"I didn't hear any horse."

"He probably tied up back there in the brush."

"Maybe so. The trouble is you can't prove any of this. If you was to have been killed, Jackson woud probably figure it as the work of another outlaw you'd had trouble with, and I'd have figured the same thing. We'd never have—"

"Hold it a minute!" Lee stared at the floor. He said softly, "I got an idea, but I'll need your help. Yours and Judy's. It'll be daylight in an hour—" He broke off at John's frown. "Will you take the chance on

me? Will you listen?"

"Go ahead, talk," John said.

THE first light was breaking across the eastern sky when John rode his roan into Ladder's yard. He tied up and rapped on the door, and he waited a good three minutes before it opened and Bob blinked at him sleepily. "Hell of a time to rouse a man," he grumbled. "What's the matter?"

"Somebody killed Lee. Shot him through the window in his bunk."

"Good Lord!"

"Listen, I want you to come with me and take a look at the body, so's I'll have a witness before I take the body in to town. Jackson will want to know exactly how it was, and it'll help me to have another man's sayso."

Bob scowled. "Judy's there, ain't she?"

"No, thank the Lord. She went to visit Bess Richter yesterday, and stayed overnight. Hurry along, man! I want to get the body to town before she gets home."

Grumbling, Bob went inside to dress, while John cut a horse out of the corral and saddled it. By the time he came back to the house, Bob was ready, and they mounted and rode for John's ranch at a fast lope, neither man speaking.

As they dismounted at the bunkhouse, John said grimly, "I put a tarpaulin over him because he don't look pretty. One shot got him through the face."

He led the way inside. Lee's bare feet stuck out from under the tarpaulin. John lifted the edge. "Take a look—" He glanced at Bob who turned gray as he stared at the red splotch on Lee's underwear. "That one in the belly, this one here in the chest." John curled back the tarpaulin at Lee's head. Lee's face was half turned into the red stain on the pillow. John covered the head. He pointed out the broken pane. "Must've shot him through there."

Bob's voice was shaky. "Who do you suppose done it?"

John shrugged. "Might be he had trouble with someone in the pen, and the man followed him here. I was a damn fool to hire him in the first place. You want to help me take him into town?"

"Hell, no!"

"All right. Thanks for coming, though. I'll tell Jackson. I got to deliver him a letter, too, and one to Judge Mitchell."

Bob stared at him. "Letters.?"

"Funny damn thing," John said, taking two envelopes from his shirt pocket. "He gave 'em to me the other day. Said if anything happened to him, to see that they were delivered." He glanced at the envelopes, started to put them back in his shirt pocket. "It figures he knew somebody was out to get him, and it just might be that he wrote it all out so's the guilty man wouldn't get away with it. What do you think?"

"I—wouldn't know."

"Well, I might as well roll him up in the tarp," John said, and bent over the bunk. "How about giving me a hand?"

He glanced over his shoulder. Bob stood inside the door, looking out. When he turned, there was a gun in his hand. John straightened. "What the hell—"

"Let's have those letters."

"Now look here—"

"Throw 'em on the floor," Bob said in a tight voice.

John gave a hard laugh. "When you asked me if Lee had told me any lies, I said no, because he hadn't. But he did tell me yesterday about you taking the money from Ward's desk, only I didn't believe him. Now I got to believe it."

"Damn you, let's have those letters!"

"So then you can shoot me and fix it to look like Lee and I had a fight, is that it? Tell me, was it really you who tried to steal that money?"

"You're damn right I did. I was sick and tired of having the old man throw Lee up to me every chance he had. It was always Lee this and Lee that, and I had it fixed to plant the money in Lee's saddlebags. He was supposed to leave for one of the line shacks early the next morning, and it wouldn't have taken more than a word after the old man found his money gone to fix things right.

Now you know it, but it won't do you much good." Bob paused, then added hoarsely, "Do you throw down the letters or do I shoot you and then take them?"

Lee poked his head from under the tarp. His hand followed, and there was a gun in it. "Neither one. Drop it, Bob!"

"Damn you—" Bob swung to fire. Lee's gun roared and Bob fell back clutching a shattered arm.

"That does it," a voice said from outside.

It was Jackson. Judy followed him inside. Lee clutched a blanket, made a wry face. "That paint may look like blood, but it sure itches. Where's that turpentine?"

Jackson said, "We'll have to bandage this gent's arm before I take him to town. Get me some hot water and bandages, will you, Judy?"

Judy didn't hear. She was busy washing paint from Lee's face. John said wryly, "I guess we'll have to do it ourselves."

The deputy led Bob outside, and John followed. At the door he looked back, and he didn't know whether to frown or to grin at the sight of the blanket-draped Lee kissing Judy. Then John guessed it was all right as long as the young man planned on being his son-in-law. And it certainly looked that way.

John grinned and closed the door softly, wondering how long before there'd be a wedding. Not long.

He could be sure of that.

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Jim could build a fence around his land but he couldn't put one around his heart

Squatter's Rights

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

HANDS braced on his hips, Jim Calhan looked out over his 180 acres of timber and rimrock and smiled. Best land in the county, he thought pridefully; bounded by Big Sugar Creek on three sides and on the fourth by the road that led to Jeb Lacy's store. His now for nine months past and all the years to come. Jim's glance caught a flash

"You're going to leave if anyone does," she said

of white in the timber to the north.

His jaw dropped and he stared hard at the offending addition to his trees. It looked almighty like one of the wagons creeping west all over the country in these years after the War Between the States, full of scrabbling children, gaunt men and tired women. Jim had nothing against settlers; he was one himself.

But those folks had no business clean off the road back on his farm. Two years in the Confederate Army had taught Jim not to hesitate.

Jaw hardening, he stepped back inside his cabin and got down his shotgun. Hobo, his white-gold collie, came bounding, but Jim turned him back sharply. He didn't want a dog of his getting shot in a row with squatters. Hobo obeyed, brush dragging.

Jim crossed the slope by the barn and swung down into the valley, long legs eating up the quarter-mile to that white object. Scowling, he stomped up the last hill, stopped dead.

A wagon, all right, but no horse or beast to pull it; a rickety-rackity-ready-to-fall-apart wagon at that. But what really froze Jim in his tracks was the girl in faded trousers and shirt standing in front of the wagon.

It was, Jim decided, both cruel and indecent for a girl to have a figure like that. With an effort of will he shifted his gaze to her face.

She was giving him stare for stare, swinging the water bucket she had filled at the creek. Jim looked down into stormy blue eyes, vivid against the honey-tanned skin and mass of waving black hair caught at her nape and tied with a red ribbon. Jim's gaze fell on her raspberrey lips, generous and tempting. He gulped.

He guessed he'd just go home and ponder on the works of God. But his feet seemed heavy as iron and before he could lift them, she blazed, "Get out!"

"Huh?" Jim gasped. Then he said warmly, "You're trespassing, lady. On my farm."

"From now on," she informed him coldly, "This camp site and about twenty acres round it are mine. You keep away." Jim gaped.

Was the girl crazy? She looked like she knew what she was doing, all right. His palms were clammy.

"Lady," he tried again, trying to keep his voice level, "You've made a mistake or something. I've lived here almost a year. The place is paid for and it's mine. You can't stay here." Jim wiped his sweating forehead with his sleeve. The girl advanced on him, small fists clenching.

"You're going to leave if anyone does," she gritted. "I just want twenty acres or so." She gave him an unsettling stare, concluded, "Let me have it and we'll get along. Otherwise, you'd better leave for California. I hate stingy men."

REMEMBERING he used to pass for a pretty tough human himself, Jim's jaw snapped shut. In spite of her looks, the nerve of this girl chilled his spine.

"Oh, no!" he snapped. "I'm staying right here. And squatters are moving on. Including women." He guessed that'd hold her.

It seemed to. She was still so long he began to squirm. He hadn't wanted to hurt her—but she was so cussed contrary. Then, suddenly, he had all he could do to protect himself.

The girl had moved like lightning, whirling, leaping into the wagon. When she showed her face again, a wicked-looking old pistol was about a foot in front of it.

"I'm pretty good with this." she warned, eyes glinting. "Get out!"

"Why, you little—" Shaking his whirling head, Jim started for the girl. The pistol centered on him, and the eyes behind it were hard. Jim stopped abruptly.

Every good soldier knows when to retreat, and he had been one. Jim left, shotgun and all, feeling foolish.

NEXT morning, feeding the cows, the hens and the spotted pig, he still felt foolish. He milked the cows, Pansy and Marigold, and now and again he'd shake his head. He strained the milk into pails; his frown grew. Still scowling, he sat down to breakfast.

He had slab bacon and three eggs, plenty of coffee, and half the lemon pie Melie Landis brought the day before. He thought of

the plump blonde girl who had made it and bit viciously into his bacon.

Melie's pale eyes had a managing look, and he had a feeling she would keep the man she married on a tight rein. Her pies were good, Jim admitted, but one would never beguile him into marriage.

Thinking of another girl who wanted no part of him, who took a pistol to him, Jim got up abruptly.

He'd go talk to her right now, and today she'd do as he said. His glance fell on the remains of his plentiful breakfast, wandered guiltily to the full shelves. The girl's clothes had been worn, almost shabby; the wagon ready to fall apart.

Was she getting enough to eat? She was as tall as Melie, but he'd bet Mellie outweighed her by thirty pounds. Jim frowned.

She'd have to leave, but he couldn't make her leave hungry. He'd give her some food for the trip. Then the question hit him right between the eyes.

Where does a girl, with no money and pretty as a scarlet flower, go? She couldn't travel the western road forever, getting run off or worse.

He remembered the pistol then, and shrugged. That girl could take care of herself. He'd take her some milk and butter, some potatoes and a slab of bacon. Firm but nice, he'd tell her to leave and—but what if she cried?

Jim quickened his stride.

When he came out of the valley by the wagon, the sack of food weighed heavy on his arm. He sent a quick glance at the wagon, then stared. From the bushes waved dainty white things no man ever wore. Jim cast a hasty look around.

Thank goodness, she wasn't there. He'd leave the food and come back later. At his shoulder, she demanded, "What are you doing here?" Jim jumped, almost dropping the sack.

Turning to face her, he saw the flare of her nostrils, the angry part of her lips. He also saw the pail of milk she was too furious to hide.

"Where," he demanded frigidly, "did you get that milk?" A flush painted her face and throat.

"From a cow," she whispered. Jim laughed shortly.

"I figgered that," he said, staring at her. "What particular cow?" Her eyes brimmed.

"It was just walking around," she defended. "The little calf. . . ." she stopped abruptly, hand cupped over her mouth. Grimly, Jim looked at her.

"Sure you didn't veal it and stash it in your wagon?" he asked sarcastically.

"No!" she cried, doubling her fist. Jim studied her a long moment.

"I guess I ought to thank you for that, at least," he said, icily polite. He put his food offering on the wagon seat. "I didn't aim to let any woman starve on my place," he told her righteously, noting her downcast eyes with stern satisfaction. "Even when she's a meddling female who's got no business to be here." Her head came up and her chin trembled.

"Everyone wants a place to live," she said fiercely. "Even meddling females." A tear rolled out of her left eye and splashed off her nose, but she still glared at him defiantly.

"I'm sorry," Jim said doggedly, trying to ignore the tear, "but this is my place. I paid good money for it and I'm keeping it. You better go home and stay there."

She pointed at the wagon. "There it is," she said, voice wavering.

Jim felt guilty and cruel.

"What the devil are you doing out wandering around alone?" he questioned irritably, running a hand over his forehead. "Don't you have any family?"

Blue eyes met Jim's accusingly. "My husband was killed in the War. We'd planned on coming out here somewhere and homesteading." She turned away from him. "We lived with Trav's folks. After he died, I was just a useless woman to feed. So I got this old wagon and left."

Jim stared at her bent shoulders. What could he say? Hesitantly, he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Maybe you could get a job," he suggested, but she swung round on him, jerking away from his hand.

"And have the women looking down their noses at me," she cried, "scared you're no good because you're a widow! And the

men—" breaking off, she flung her next words at him. "No. I've tried just about everything and I'm through being driven."

Women, thought Jim despairingly, wiping his brow. They twisted things around and put you in the wrong when you were just minding your own business. It was his farm, but she had him feeling like he ought to hand it over to her, lock, stock and barrel. Well, he wasn't going to.

"What'll people think?" he asked, trying another tack. "You want to get a bad reputation?"

Her eyes turned steel gray. "Anyone who thinks that," she gritted, "had better remember I've got a pistol."

Jim swore under his breath. What can you say to a girl like that?

"How about me?" he blurted. "The neighbors'll think. . . ." he stopped, feeling the blood rush to his face, hearing the girl's mocking giggle.

"If you're afraid of me," she managed, between bell-like tinkles of laughter, "Just stay away from the wagon, and I'll promise not to bother you."

BURNING, Jim looked down at her, feeling like a kid caught in a melon patch. Her mouth was curved in mockery, her eyes taunting. Jim caught her above the elbows.

The smile faded and her eyes went dark. She fought, trying to break free, but Jim forced her to him, not caring for her kicks and scratches. The raspberry mouth was just under his, and he kissed it, bending her head back in the hard angle of his arm, lips angry and bruising at first, then gentler. Thoroughly and long he kissed her, till she stopped pushing him away, till she leaned back in his arms, warm and little and melting. Shakily, Jim drew away, letting her go.

Her eyes were misty, seeming almost blind, and he felt a sharp remorse. He hadn't meant the kiss to be like that.

Shivering a little, she looked him up and down. "Go away," she ordered, cold as the creek mists. "Go away and leave me alone." Jim flinched.

He wanted to ask her to forgive him, wanted to make her know her kiss was all he had dreamed of. But her chin was high, and the marks of Jim's hands were red and angry on her flesh.

"Please," he tried, stepping forward. "Let me tell you " She turned her back on him.

"A moment ago," she said scornfully, "you explained yourself very clearly." Jim's jaw clamped tight.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. She'd listen to him if he had to tie her up to do it.

Quick as the dart of a cottonmouth, her hand caught him square across the mouth, hard, with all her strength behind it. Staring in shock, Jim let her loose.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, hands out in front of her. Blood pounded in Jim's head. He stepped toward her, reaching.

Contempt was in her eyes, and fear. The fear stopped Jim cold.

He forced his hands to his side, watching her.

Her eyes stayed wide and scared. Jim cursed himself. No use in talking as long as she felt like that. Disgust and anger bitter in him, he swung away.

He'd leave her alone a day or two, let her calm down. Then this thing had to be settled.

THAT unsettling kiss stayed with him all day long; her face was always just back of his eyelids. Realizing he didn't even know her name, he laughed shortly. While he was moiling over her, she was pretty certainly hating him for a heavy-handed animal. He'd go split kindling and get her off his mind. Starting out the door, he ran right into Melie Landis.

"Land sakes, Jim," she shrilled, "don't knock a body over." Jim edged away from her, wishing she lived more than a mile down the road. Melie followed him up.

"I got to thinking that you likely hadn't a thing fresh-baked to eat," she gushed on, eager and determined to take him in hand, "so I made some apple dumplings and brought them over. It's a mercy of the Lord you don't go to staves the way you eat." Even Melie couldn't talk forever without catching her breath. Reluctantly, she paused, breathed deeply, and rushed on. "We'll have a nice talk while you eat." She took the snowy cloth off the huge basket.

Jim's heart had taken a beating, but there was nothing the matter with his nose, tantalized by the spicy smell. His mouth watered as he pulled up a chair.

"You go right ahead and eat, Jim. I'll fetch you some milk." Jim ate eagerly; Melie sure could cook.

She tortured a curl in place over her ear, then folded her ams contentedly upon her heavy bosom, watching him.

"I admire to see a man relish his food," she twittered. "A good cook makes a good wife, Pa says." *He's said it to me often enough*, Jim thought sourly, ducking his head. All of a sudden the crust seemed tough and the apples mushy. He pushed the bowl away.

Clasping her hands, Melie hurried on, "Yes, Jim, looks fade and die like the rose, but a good cook improves with time."

Her sharp gaze pinned him; squirming, Jim mumbled a feeble assent.

"You don't sound too sure, Jim Calhan," Melie snapped, instantly alert. "Has that no-account woman been giving you ideas?" Jim felt his neck stiffen, but he made his voice mild. Melie was a prize gossip.

"Who're you talking about?" he asked innocently. Melie's eyes narrowed.

"That skinny creature hiding out in your timber, that's who!" she proclaimed. "Don't pretend you haven't noticed her, the shameless hussy!" Jim jumped up, knocking his chair over.

"She's not skinny, Melie Landis," he said with heat, glowering down at the fussy little woman. "She's a nice girl, too, and you keep your gossiping tongue off her." Melie's round face seemed to swell.

"Well!" she got out at least. "So that's the way you feel. *Well!"* Melie spun round to the table, snatching up the basket and remaining dumplings. Moving with quick, jerky, little steps, she whisked out the door. Dazed, Jim stared after her.

"I do declare!" he heard her exclaim. "Well, I do swan!" Jim sank into a chair.

He was glad he'd eaten one dumpling before Melie got her dander up; she wouldn't be bringing him any more. Could that girl in the wagon cook? Ruefully, Jim shook his head.

That girl was sore at him, and with more right than Melie. When it came to women, he was pretty dumb. . . .

WHEN two days passed with no sign of the girl camped in his timber, Jim decided that, dumb or not, he'd have to talk to her. When a man wakes up hugging his pillow and talking to it, he'd better do something.

He put on clean trousers and the red shirt he'd bought in St. Louis. He scrubbed his face and shaved it smooth, adding the scented shaving lotion he wore on Sundays, and he slicked back his hair till the curls lay almost flat. Scrounging to look in the mirror, Jim thought brashly that if the girl liked dudes, he out-duded them all.

Slightly drunk on the heady lotion, making up melting speeches, Jim floated over the hills to the wagon site. The rise and fall of voices stopped him short about a hundred yards from the wagon.

They were women's voices. There was no mistaking that high whiny tone of Melie's. Jim went to earth like a hunted fox.

Shifting around in the laurel thicket so he could see them, Jim hoped prayerfully they wouldn't see him. One mad woman was bad enough, but two!

Melie was saying in her squeaky little voice, "Anne Stuart. Such a pretty name. Mine's Melie Landis." Jim was glad to learn the girl's name. But why in blazes was Melie being so all-fired sweet?

"You see, dear," purred Melie, giving Jim his answer, "I thought being as you're a stranger and all alone, I ought to warn you about Jim Calhan." Her beady little eyes dwelt on Anne. "A new face and he's after it fickle as a breeze." Jim sucked in his breath. What a liar Melie was! He thought Anne's face turned white, but her tone was steady, amused.

"It's kind of you to warn me, Miss Landis," she said, "but it doesn't really matter to me." Pride came harshly into her words. "My husband's dead, but I'm still in love with him." Jim dug his nails into his palms.

There was Anne, alive and warm, all he wanted. In love with a dead soldier so that Melie's lies meant nothing to her.

"Such faithfulness!" Melie applauded. "It's very unusual nowadays." She turned to leave, smiling complacently.

"I'll see if anyone hereabouts wants a hired girl," she offered generously. "It's not fitting for a woman to live on a single man's farm like this." *You shouldn't have said that, Melie,* thought Jim, shifting on his knees to see Anne better.

Anne moved in front of the stouter girl, blocking her way. "Why are you so worried about me and Mr. Calhan?" she demanded. "Why don't you go home and mind your own business?" Melie backed up.

"I only wanted to help you—" she shrilled. Jim hugged his knees as Anne looked Melie over, slowly, scathingly.

"I think I know why you're so interested in helping me," she said softly. Turning her back, she walked toward the wagon. "Good-by, Miss Landis." Blood rose in Melie's face.

"Why—" she spluttered; heels clicking wrathfully she minced off. Jim glanced back at Anne.

Unmoving, she stood by the wagon. Jim felt it wasn't the time to talk with her. Stealthily, he worked his way out of the laurel thicket, then strode homeward, worry yammering in his ears.

Melie had made him out a double-distilled rat and what had he done to make Anne think differently? Besides, she said she still loved that dead soldier. He shook his head in bewilderment . . . .

HE WRESTLED with his devils all that night and far into the next day. Was he really in love with Anne? What was he going to do about it if he was? She was still in love with that dead soldier, and a man can't fight a dead lover.

Round and round it went in his head, and he couldn't eat and he couldn't sleep. He did his chores but the possessive pride in caring for what was his was gone. His clear spring water tasted brackish, and the cabin seemed a jail. Hobo pushed his head along Jim's leg, sensing his master's trouble. The sun was low in the sky when Jim put on his red shirt again knowing what he must do.

Only this time there wasn't any vainglory in him. He just wanted Anne to see him slicked up once before he went away. He couldn't help her loneliness, but he couldn't see her homeless.

She could have the farm. He was young and healthy; there was plenty of land in the west just for the taking. Or he could re-enlist in the Army. . . .

He could do all kinds of things. But could he forget Anne?

Walking the familiar slope, he knew he didn't want to. His heart snapped up into his throat when he saw no trace of the old wagon.

He stared unbelievingly, closed his eyes and looked again. She was gone. But where had she got a horse to pull the wagon?

Jim had one horse, a sorrel gelding, that ran loose in this pasture most of the time. Bending, he studied the ground. There were tracks, all right. Looked like 6's, the size his gelding wore.

Jim clamped his lips tight together. While he'd been ready to hand her his farm, she'd stolen his horse! He stared blindly, numbed by his betrayal.

Blood poured into his head, turning him dizzy mad. He came from an old Kentucky family that hung horsethieves.

Jim struck out after the tracks, and he went faster than the gelding, for within the hour, he heard the clopping of hoofs, and the complaining creek of wheels. He stopped.

What could he say to her? Let her go? *No,* his pride declared stubbornly. Give, yes; if she'd come and talked to him, he'd have given her the horse and everything he owned. But she couldn't steal from him. She'd gone without a word, not trusting him, and he was going to tell her what he thought about it. Clenching his fists, he walked faster.

The creaking and clopping stopped up ahead. He guessed Anne had come out on the wagon road and stopped to rest. Then he heard voices. One was high and shrill, the second, gruff, low. Jim got a move on.

MELIE LANDIS was standing in the road, hands on her broad hips, facing Anne, sitting pale and quiet on the wagon

seat. Behind Melie Jim saw a carriage, and the man driving it was Fred Warpet, the sheriff. He was sitting stiffly like a mighty uncomfortable man. Jim wondered what in thunder he was doing driving Melie out here.

"See, Mr. Warpet," Melie was triumphing, "she's stolen Jim's horse." Warpet fidgeted.

"Well?" bristled Melie. "Aren't you going to do something?" Before he knew what he was doing, Jim stood in the road confronting Melie. Squealing, Melie jumped back.

"She's stealing your horse, Jim!" she screeched. "Make the sheriff arrest her!" Jim looked past her to Warpet.

"Fred," he suggested, "why don't you take Melie home?" He let his gaze dwell briefly on the puffing woman. "I don't know why my intended wife can't drive my horse if she wants to. It'll be hers when we're married." He was glad the minute the words were out. Anne must answer to him for the gelding, but he wasn't letting anyone else bother her. Melie's eyes turned light and round as a cat's.

She started to speak, whirled around, and bounded into the sheriff's carriage. Warpet cast a bewildered glance at her, then looked at Jim.

"No offense, Jim," he pacified. Jim nodded curtly. The carriage drove off. Slowly, Jim turned back to Anne.

Her head drooped and she wouldn't look at him. Jim's heart pounded.

"Anne," he said softly, "Look at me." She shook her head. Jim walked up to the wagon, lifted her down.

She was light and wonderfully sweet in his arms. Jim steadied her, stepping back abruptly before he lost his head.

"Why?" he asked. Her head came up.

"You won't believe me," she burst out defiantly, "but I didn't steal your old horse." Jim looked at her. What did she mean?

Anne went on in a rush. "Melie told me the horse was hers and that you were going to marry her, that it embarrassed you for me to be on your place. She loaned me the horse to pull the wagon into town." Jim whistled.

"And then she met you with the sheriff," he finished hotly. "Oh, Anne!" She looked at him, pleading for belief.

"I didn't steal from you—" she faltered—"except maybe that one pail of milk." Jim wanted to pull her to him and tell her he'd take care of her the rest of her life, but he put his hands on her shoulders instead, making her meet his eyes.

"Anne," he assured her, "You can't steal a thing from a man who wants to give it to you—you understand that. And even if you tried to steal, I wouldn't blame you a bit—and I'd still love you. I just can't help it even if I'd want to."

Her lips parted in wonder, and Jim hurried on before he made a complete fool of himself and kissed her again.

"But you're still in love with your husband, I understand that, so I'm not going to pester you to marry me. Just go back to the farm. You can have everything exceptin' Hobo and my clothes and such. You wouldnt' want those, anyhow." Anne's blue eyes seemed misty.

Jim caught in his breath—if he died for it, he had to kiss her just once before he left. It was a warm, heady, throbbing kiss, shared, wanted by both of them. Jim finally lifted his head, still holding her close, stirred by her warmth.

Had she really kissed him that way, or was it the fever in him?

"I'm sorry," he began, "I—" She seemed to wake out of a dream. Her smile was tender.

"Jim," she said softly, "You must have heard what I told Melie the other day. Part of it wasn't true. I just wanted to shut the awful meddling woman up." Her eyes met his, looked down quickly, shyly, he thought. "Trav and I—it was never, *never* like this." They stood looking at each other in wonder.

She asked gravely, "Jim—were you really going away?" He nodded.

"But now," he whispered, bending his head, "you couldn't drive me off—with a pistol."

"Maybe," she smiled, lifting her face to his," I would have used it to keep you here."

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To Wed an Oregon Man

By JANE HARDEY

I

THERE were twenty-seven wagons in the train. Reatha Donley sighted it late in the afternoon as it came out of the eastern hills and wound slowly through the green bluffs and down to the river bottoms. From a small, weathered shack on the west bank she counted each cumbersome vehicle as it hove into view.

Then, while the wagons waited on the far shore, a horseman tested the crossing as the wide river could not be ferried for lack of depth. The girl's brown eyes were intent upon him, that long blackish figure in the saddle, who so gently urged his slim-legged, star-faced bay into the twisting waters. Her hand clutched the bodice of her old calico dress

Reatha watched him as he tested the water for pull and depth

She already had one little man to look after—what she wanted now was a man who could look after himself. . . .

which had faded from rose to a dull sand-pink. Well might this guide feel out the tricky old Platte, whose browny waters held quicksand pockets that could swallow an ox or a wagon. Shet knew it was untrustworthy, a deadly river and hard to conquer, and a sharp uneasiness grew in her, uneasiness for the safety of this train which meant so much to her—though she knew not a soul in its company.

She could see none of the man's features, but knew he was young by his voice, which carried clear and confident, to steady the nervous bay.

"Come, Sweetheart, my girl, that yon willow sapling's our goal," he encouraged the plunging mare. "Then it 's back for the wagons and we'll all be fixed up. And the best bag of oats the town's got will be yours tonight, my pride. That I promise."

With sounding pole he tested the water for pull and depth, and for the deadly quicksand, making his way slowly but safely to the other shore. As they emerged he dismounted and stood dripping water from the thighs down. His eyes swept the raw trail town of Muddy Bend; they estimated the bank's grade and went again back to the river.

He turned then and faced the watching girl and she saw his eyes were blue, and swift moving like lightning. He removed his black, wide-awake hat, bowed, and in an unhurried but incredibly swift movement he was again in the saddle and making his way across the river.

The livestock was brought over first. Then the wagons by threes. He piloted each group, giving needed hand or rope and shouting out encouragement. They called him Chris, Christopher Jewett, and Reatha, seeing each wagon emerge safely from its river baptism, thought how well the name suited him.

She knew the tired travelers would rest on the common tomorrow, and resolved that when they moved on, the following day, that she and Benjy, her brother, would be with them. Five new wagons, their canvas tops gleaming in unsullied whiteness, now waited, ready to join up and go on to Oregon with the train.

Reatha had tried to attach herself and brother to these five, whose owners she knew, but they were captained by stern, fanatically-pious Elam Frink, who had flatly refused to allow a smallish girl of seventeen and a boy of nine, who was, he claimed, a thief, a liar and a regular little hellion, to accompany them.

But now the Oregon train was here. She was going to do as Papa had asked with his last breath, take Benjy away from the drifters and riffraff of the trail town, where it had been easy for the lonely boy to pick up swear words and maybe fib a little. In spite of Elam Frink and a dozen like him they were going to that fine Pacific Territory, with its coastal breezes that would change the sickly boy into a strapping young man, and where good opportunities awaited a healthy girl who was willing to work.

No further need now to beg Elam Frink. This tall, kindly stranger, who understood animals so well, would also know the mind-workings of a lad. He was the one to see. She would join up with his contingent. Tomorrow.

BY DUSK the next day she had converted their few pieces of furniture into cash. Then, with a heavy roll riding one slim hip, and towing Benjy with a firm young hand, she made her way to the town square. The boy lugged a canvas telescope bag with square corners that kept hitting against his bony knees. With wide gray eyes popping from a freckled, wedge-shaped face, he was trembling with excitement.

He would have tarried where a fiddle, a banjo and a belly-pinching accordian shrilled out an invitation to the now clean and rested travelers to dance, had not his sister pulled him along.

"Benjamin Franklin Donley! Stop your teeth rattling like beans in a gourd!" she chided. "Won't anybody in the whole outfit want to take a boy they think's falling apart with palsy. You want to go to Oregon like we planned, like Papa wanted us to, don't you? Then you perk up. Mind sister now."

The boy's lower lip quivered. The long head in the brave coonskin cap with its bushy tail hanging limp and lifeless between his sharp shoulder blades, sank against her. Her

hand pressed his cheek and found it wet. It had been a mistake, mentioning Papa who had been gone only a week.

How well she recalled almost his last words. "See he gets away from here soon, daughter," he had said in a tired, thin voice. "He's not a bad boy at heart. It's just that he's had no one to guide him since I've been sick. We wanted to take you both to Oregon, your mother and me did. After she went I seemed to lose all heart. I couldn't seem to go and leave her here. Now you'll have to do things I should have done, Reatha, darlin'."

"I will, Papa. I'll get Benjy to Oregon," she had given sacred promise with a full heart.

Gently but firmly she pushed the drooping head erect. "Come on, honey. We've got to find this man I told you about and make our arrangements before Elam Frink finds out and stops us."

Benjy dried his sniffles on a coat sleeve and lifted his head as the music blared forth again. He dropped the telescope and shot away like a grounded tree squirrel.

Reatha snatched at him and called but he was lost in the crowd. In exasperation, stranded with more luggage than she could manage, she looked helplessly around. She felt before she saw the keen blue eyes of the black-hatted stranger upon her. He stepped forward, smiling, folding a letter he had been reading around a picture and slipping them into his pocket.

"Do you want me to go after that young hellion, Miss?" he inquired.

Her chin lifted and set until a tiny cleft was visible. Her throat swelled until the ties of her poke bonnet cut into the soft flesh of her neck.

"The boy is my brother," she answered primly. "He's not real strong, and he may be a little spoiled, sir, but he's no—no hellion."

The stranger, Christopher Jewett, looked contrite. "Why, Miss, I didn't mean anything. It's just a word." Then, with a closer look, he smiled. "Say. Haven't I seen you before? Are you the girl on the bluff? Why, sure you are."

She told him then of her wish to join the train.

He said quickly, "I'll fetch the boy. Then we'll go find the captain."

Her eyes, bright with hope, followed him as he strode away, going unerringly toward the music. He was as straight as a plumbed line, like the Oregon trees Papa had talked about. He was a fine, strong man for Benjy to pattern after.

They look nice together, she thought, as she saw them coming back—almost like they belonged to one another.

Benjy piped up importantly, "I was lookin' for the captain, Reath. I was goin' to tell him—" The fib broke off in his throat as he met the man's full gaze. His eyes dropped to his copper-toed boots. He dug one into the ground, wriggled in discomfort, and finally confessed, "I was listening to the music."

"Well now, I can't see any harm in that," Chris Jewett remarked as he bent for the heavy roll while the boy took up the telescope bag.

II

CHRIS led the way past many wagons to a far corner of the square, where a smoking blaze from a pine torch shadowed and graved the faces of the men grouped around it. He walked on straight to one man who turned—and Reatha found herself looking at the frowning countenance of Elam Frink. Chris had innocently brought her to the captain of the Muddy Bend wagons, thinking she belonged with them. It was the worst thing that could have happened. Her plea would hold no weight with Elam.

Before she could speak he began to berate her. "I've told you you're not goin' with us, Reatha Donley!" he snapped at her. "You're stayin' in Muddy Bend where I've seen to it you can make a livin'. I've spoke to Widow Crouty and she's willin' to give you your board and keep for helpin' her at her eatin' house. She'll even let your brother wash dishes and run errands so's you can be together. Right Christian of her it is, too."

She saw it was her will against Elam's will. But she faced it, knowing her need was

greater than his. Already she was convinced they must go in this train. No other would have a man like Chris Jewett. Benjy had to go with Chris and she had to go with Benjy. It couldn't be changed.

"We'd be right handy, Mr. Frink," she stated earnestly. "I can cook and sew and do a lot of needful things. Benjy's past nine now, and growing like a ragweed. A boy can save a lot of steps around a camp, carrying wood and water and—"

"I won't take him—or you!" Frink declared with a scowl. "He's a bad youngun, headed for destruction."

Nate Gleason, a homely little man, gnarled like a stunted tree, spoke up. "I might could take the girl, Elam. Ma's sister couldn't come at the last minute and I've worried that Ma's goin' to be lonesome. The girl might help. But I can't take the boy," he regretted. "If someone can stow him away. . . ."

Others bid for the girl, but no one wanted a sickly boy with a bad name. Reatha seethed inwardly as she saw his shame and deep humiliation. Couldn't they see he wasn't bad inside? She turned to Chris Jewett.

He nodded to her and said to Elam, "It so happens that I need a boy to help me drive since I'm alone. I'm Christopher Jewett, from St. Joseph. I own my wagon and load of sawmill equipment. I'm on my way to Oregon to live and I'll be responsible for the boy."

Warm and weakening was the tide of relief that swept over Reatha. It was God's own answer to her prayer, having Benjy ride with Chris all the way. It settled everything.

But defeat sat ill upon Elam Frink. "It ain't fair to see a stranger get hooked into a bad bargain," he grumbled. "The boy's weakly and he's bad—"

"Wiry," corrected Chris curtly. "As for bad, I'm a man of twenty-five, full grown. Don't reckon he's goin' to lead me astray. Now then, you've done your duty—and I get the boy."

But Elam had another argument against it. "Who's goin' to see after him when we get to Oregon? What about then?"

Chris only smiled. "Why we'll set up our mill and have us a cabin built in no time."

"He's as strong willed as Elam," Reatha told herself. "Once he's in anything he's in it up to his neck. And he's on our side."

"But the girl," Elam triumphed. "She can't live with you. It wouldn't be respectable—unless you married her."

ALL her fine hopes crumbled. He was as determined as a hangman—trying to scare Chris out. Why did he hate them so? Then a glance at the flushed face of young Taylor Yates, at Elam's side, gave her the answer. For Tay's longing was plain. He had wanted her, he still did, though he was going to Oregon with Elam and was promised in marriage to Elam's daughter, Eva.

"A flirty girl can kick up more trouble than a band of war-pathed Indians," the old man was saying. "It's the rule of the train that none shall go unless she's wed, or promised to wed. And I won't break that rule."

Shame varnished Reatha's cheeks with hot color. He was trying to make Chris think she was a scheming hussy. Well. . . .

She stepped forward then and in a voice that was bell-clear, she told her lie. "No one need worry about Benjy and me after we get to Oregon. I'm going to wed when I reach there. An—an Oregon man is waiting for me now."

The peculiar paleness of Elam's face changed. He gave her close scrutiny. "Girl, a promise is a bindin' thing. Almost as bindin' as a preacher's word."

"I know," she replied, clamping a hand down over Benjy's gaping mouth before it could accuse her. "I know well what a promise means. And we have some money. We can buy provisions."

Ungraciously Elam gave up. "Take the girl, Nate. And you, Jewett, you take the boy. But remember, at the least sign of trouble comin' from either of them they'll both be put off at the nearest settlement."

Silently Reatha followed Nate Gleason to his wagon. She had told a lie. But—they were going to Oregon! Satisfaction, as deep as the currents of the old Platte, flowed through her.

Nate thrust his homely head into his wagon, withdrew it and allowed Ma had gone over to hear the music. "I'll go fetch her," he offered, and hurried away.

With a pang of loneliness Reatha saw Ben-

jy happily following Chris Jewett to his wagon. The boy was already accepting him. Well—it was what she wanted, the thing she had lied for.

Candace Gleason cried a little when she showed her the bed in the wagon that was to have been her sister's. Then she gave the girl's shoulder a pat and made her welcome, refusing all offer of money, saying she could pay her way with them by helping out.

The sun had not yet topped the bluffs when the train got under way next morning. Dew hung in tiny globes from every blade of grass; the summer breeze was mild. The spirits of the travelers were high. They were rested and refreshed; provisions had been replenished and the crossing of the Platte was behind them.

The girlish heart of Reatha Donley held both happiness and regrets. She sent a silent farewell to Mama and Papa sleeping on the hill. Memory wrapped tender folds about them that would forever abide with her. Then, as she sat on the big wagon seat beside Nate and Candace Gleason, she squared her slim shoulders and set her brown eyes to look ahead.

For there was Benjy. By some legerdemain Chris Jewett had arranged it thus, that his wagon was last among the old ones and Nate's first of the five from Muddy Bend. He had done it for her, that she might keep the boy in sight.

III

IN CAMP she was as busy as a river full of beavers. She hunted work, showing her willingness to help, her desire to cause no trouble. As days and weeks passed she avoided Taylor Yates so carefully that even the watchful, critical eyes of Elam Frink could find no fault.

To her this new life was worth all the hardships it imposed. The vitality of the vast region aroused a deep response in her. The main Oregon trail they were following lay south of the Platte at varying fractions of a mile. As they wound through islands of bright sunflowers and patches of lavender daisies she dreamed of faraway Oregon, and of a pine-spiced cabin home she might have there.

At length the turgid South Platte lay before them with its perilous crossing, which Nate judged to be greater than the crossing at Muddy Bend had been. Here Chris Jewett brought all the ingenuity he possessed into play. He instructed the men how to windlass the wagons down the steep banks, and how to hold back the spokes to control the descending heavy vehicles as they hit the water.

With great care and patience the crossing was negotiated with small damage. The caravan moved on, now following the course of the North Platte. In July they entered a treeless, two-hundred mile stretch of rough country, going toward the Black Hills of Wyoming, whose low, tree-covered summits smudged the skyline ahead. This was Indian country, where Ogallalas, Brules and Kiowas, and many other tribes of the Sioux Nation, had been so deadly for other emigrants before the new treaty had been signed back in Washington.

For some time they had been following in the wake of a small caravan, its size a risk in spite of the treaty. That they were unskilled in ways of the trail was evidenced by the costly but cumbersome things they had been obliged to discard. A fine walnut dresser with beautiful carvings was among them. Reatha let her hands fondle its smooth surface and could have cried when it was chopped up for wood. A tiny baby shoe she found and kept.

It had taken her a long time to arrive at the conclusion that Chris Jewett was avoiding her. She manufactured excuses to go to his wagon but Benjy was always pasted to his side until she sometimes wanted to shake her young brother and send him scooting. She found no opportunity to talk with Chris alone.

He brought the boy to their campfire each evening and remained with them to talk endlessly of Oregon. In a year spent there he had seen the seasons round. He had filed on free land east of Oregon City where he was going to set up his mill.

"Settlers will be comin' in fast now, since it's God's own country," he said of it. "Tall, straight trees that delight a man, and flowers that delight a woman. White-faced dogwood and wake robbins in the spring and rhododendrons everywhere later on."

He told of the great Idaho river they would cross, how it wound like a serpent and was named for one.

Reatha, listening, and seeing the rapt expression on her brother's face, marveled at the change in him. He never swore or told the smallest lie. Chris was making a man out of him. For Chris himself was a man, a real one that a girl could be proud to marry, and in her brown eyes a new fire was kindled, a new resolve was formed in her heart.

He soon took over the boy's lessons. One evening Benjy had great trouble with the pesky word marry and would have skipped it had not Chris held him at it until he learned it well. As a reward after the spelling lessons Chris was helping him carve a totem pole from a length of wood. And he taught him how to imitate the call of a whimpering owl, with one false note.

"So you can use it as a signal if you're ever captured by Indians," he imparted to his enthralled pupil. "Not that there's any danger of that since the new treaty's been signed," he hastened to add. "But there are white renegades that have no treaties, and of course anyone can get lost."

IT GAVE Reatha some comfort to see the desire always alive in Tay Yates's frosty-lidded eyes. He appreciated her even if Chris didn't. She favored him with more smiles. Thus emboldened Tay made open eyes at her which the watchful Elam saw and liked not a bit.

On a chill night when they were camped near the divide and the circle of fire was like a warm livingroom, Elam Frink came to them and aimed a remark directly at the girl.

"Three more days and we'll be at Snider Junction where the trails cross. There'll be other trains there and we'll lay over for a rest and a visit. Some of us will get mail. I suppose you, Reatha Donley, will be gettin' word from that Oregon man of yours."

Reatha started guiltily. Her Oregon man! She had forgotten all about her lie. Having served his purpose she had let "the Oregon man" slide from her mind. But to Elam she was bound. Did others—did Chris Jewett think so? Was that why he had avoided her?

A warmth greater than the warmth of the fire flowed over her. It was true. She was sure of that. But just now all eyes were upon her. To deny the Oregon man would infuriate Old Elam. It would be hard to keep Taylor Yates in his place. Then trouble would come and they would be put off at Snider Junction. She must placate Elam for the time being. Later she must find a way to tell Chris the truth—though it would not be easy, admitting her lie to an upright man like Chris.

"Oh, yes," she stammered. "Of course I'll get a letter."

The next day things began to go wrong. First was the change in Benjy. He had reverted to his old headstrong ways. During the noon stop she found his precious totem pole disfigured and thrown away.

"Why, Benjy!" she exclaimed, returning it to him. "What is the matter? I thought you liked it!"

Freckles stood out on the sulky boyish face. "Don't want no ole pole. I ain't no Northern Injun, payin' mind to truck like that." And he jerked away from her hands.

"I'll tell Chris how you're acting," she threatened. "I'll tell him to wax you good with a birch!"

But Benjy had fled, his face twisted and puckered. His sister's heart ached for him. Some small tragedy had upset his world. She had no time to follow him, to pull the long head against her bosom and comfort him. There was too much to be done. But that evening, she promised herself, she would talk to Chris about it. And she would also confess her lie.

The prospect cheered her and later, when they moved on and she saw Benjy on Sweetheart near the head of the train, she smiled. Riding Chris's mare was a special privilege. Already Chris had ironed out things for Benjy.

The afternoon was far spent when she saw and heard him come galloping down the line of wagons yelling and screaming like a wild boy.

Chris talked to them endlessly about Oregon

"Injins! Injins! Injins! Listen everybody! There's Injins right ahead of us!"

Every wagon pulled up sharp as they got the dread word.

Benjy kept on yelling. "Chris! Mr. Gleason! We're runnin' into a million Injins! I saw them! They're waitin' to scalp us. I saw them in the sycamores 'bout a mile ahead!"

Disbelief turned to alarm. Men swarmed from the wagons and came running to hear details. Where? How many?

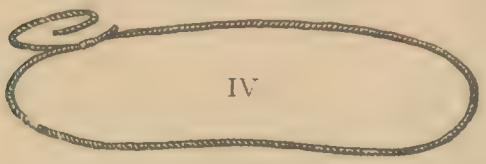
"There's outriders ahead," Elam Frink observed, but his hands were shaking. "They'd a warned us. The boy's lyin'."

Benjy seemed stunned. Then he said solemnly, "They're both dead. The Injuns got 'em and nearly got me. I was close enough to see the red paint on their faces and the feathers on their war bonnets. Sure is a lot of 'em," and he turned to look back.

Elam's face grew pasty. "They wouldn't dare. There's a new treaty been signed!

They wouldn't. . . ."

No one listened to him. Treaties could be broken. Wasting no time they climbed back on their wagons and circled for a stand. Elam, seeing the dread preparations, sank to his knees and raised a hollow appeal to heaven. Chris filled the breach, praying with action, directing things to best advantage against attack.



IV

HUDDLED behind the barricade of wagons they waited. Tales of Indian atrocities boiled in the minds of all. Elam Frink's wife fainted and Elam was close to it himself. An hour dragged by. Two of them brought thickening twilight. It was guessed the Indians were waiting for full darkness. When fear had reached fever pitch a lookout reported two horsemen approaching. It proved to be their own outriders.

"What's gone wrong?" they asked, riding close and seeing the circle. "Why are you campin' here? It's only a short way to Camp Springs."

Upon hearing the story they were mystified. "Why, we've been as far as Camp Springs. Had a visit with a small outfit there. We never saw no Indian sign anywheres."

Lanterns were lighted and circled around the agonized Benjy. As explanations were demanded he hid his contorted face in the center of his sister's back and would face no one.

Suddenly the outriders burst into wild, hilarious laughter. "Ho, ho, ho! Guess we know what the boy's Injuns was!" they chuckled. "We found a great drove of turkeys roostin' in some sycamores."

Reaching behind their saddles they brought forth a dozen dead birds and held them up. Their red wattles were the boy's war paint, the long feathers the war bonnets. Laughter rolled long and loud from eased hearts.

On the face of Elam Frink was only cold fury. He rushed to Benjy and clamped his bony fingers onto the lad's thin shoulders and tried to shake him apart.

"You devil! You hell spawn!" he roared. "Your lies have kept us here in dry camp tonight when we could a been at Camp Springs, visitin' with other folks! You've scared the women out of their senses. I'll show you—"

Chris got hold of the boy and pushed him gently behind him. "It's just a boy's imagination on a tear, Elam," he made excuse. "No use blamin' him too much. We all act funny when we're excited. You didn't cut a pretty picture yourself."

His words and smile whipped the old man's rage to a high pitch. "Off they go like I promised! There's no room in my train for liars. He'll be ousted at Snider Junction—and the girl with him."

"The boy is in my wagon," Chris replied quietly. "You've no say-so over that part of the train. And the girl—she's told no lie."

REATHA, whipped by her conscience, wanted mightily to cleanse her soul. But she saw she couldn't. It would only get them into worse trouble. She would have to keep quiet until Chris got them out of this mess. She had no doubt that he would do so.

Elam broke out again. "He's a nuisance, a menace—"

It was the boy, as angry as a Kansas tornado, who stopped him, who darted out to confront his accuser.

"You—you whey-faced ole man!" he shouted. "You're a d—a danged ole liar yourself! My lies ain't no worse than your lies!"

"Benjamin Donley!" his horrified sister exclaimed. "You hush that talk! You know Mr. Frink doesn't tell lies."

"He does so!" Benjy stoutly maintained. "I've heard him. He tells whoppers every day to the Lord. About lovin' and kindness. He don't love no one." He whipped around suddenly and turned upon his sister. "You tell lies, too, Reath Donley. You wash my mouth out with soap and then tell lies yourself!"

She saw he was striking out at something that had hurt him. Behind those swimming, blazing eyes was much misery that even his own sister seemed an enemy. He swallowed

hard and went on.

"You lied about that Oregon man. There ain't any. You said that so we could come with the train. And you lied when you said there'd be a letter at Snider Junction. If there ain't no man how can he write—"

He stopped his words suddenly, agony in every working feature. But still he wasn't through. His big hurt was pointed at Chris. "And you, Chris—" he choked up making further speech impossible. All the woes of his young life were printed on his face.

Chris, seeing his need, sank to one knee beside him. "Benjy, lad, what Reatha—what your sister said wasn't really a lie," he said gently. "It was force of circumstances that made her say that. And you mustn't think I've lied to you either. We made a bargain, you and me. Not to cuss or lie, or do ugly things."

The pointed chin sank until it rested against his thin chest, until the tail of his coonskin cap rolled around and hung beside it and was stirred by his heavy breathing.

"You same as lied," he mumbled. "Makin' me think I was goin' all the way to Oregon in your wagon."

There was relief in the short laugh Chris gave. "But you are goin' all the way with me," he insisted, giving the small shoulders a reassuring shake. "And you won't be put off at the Junction either. I'll see to that."

Still the boy pulled away from him. "You'll forget all about me when you get to Snider Junction and marry that girl's a-waitin' for you there. I saw it in your letter—saw her face picture too. Her name's Vinnie May."

As Chris stood up Reatha saw the boy clearly and her silly hope that he had lied faded out. He had not lied. He was purging himself with the truth.

"Benjy," Chris said soberly, looking down at him. "You wouldn't snoop, would you?"

"No! I didn't snoop," the boy claimed. "The letter fell right down and I happened to see that marry word. I was practicin' my spellin' lesson. Honest I wasn't snoopin', Chris."

Elam Frink seized his chance. "Of course he's a snoop," his harsh voice accused. "I've told you what kind he is and the girl's no better. And you, too, my fine feller!" he roared out at the one who had opposed him so often. "We're findin' out about you. Well, you ain't pickin' up any woman of the trails and foistin' her on us decent people. It must be shady or you wouldn't have kept it so quiet."

CHRIS shot out a long arm, grabbed the front of Elam's shirt and twisted it tight. "You evil old crow! You keep a clean tongue in your mouth when you speak about her. She's a fine, pure girl and there's nothin' underhand about it. I've made arrangements with my captain for her to go on with us."

Hearing his words, Reatha reached for Benjy. A push guided him away from the quarreling men and into the shadows. There she bent to peer into the small pale face.

"Benjy. You're not lying . . . about that letter. You did see it?" But she knew his answer already.

He nodded vigorously. "I did, Reath. I saw the marry word plain as anything."

She straightened. "Go get Sweetheart and lead her over to that thicket," she directed. "Then get what things you can from the wagon. I'll be back in a minute with mine. We're going to go to Oregon like Papa told us to do. All the blabbering Elam Frink and —and Chris Jewett can do won't stop us either. Hurry now!"

"But—gee whiz, Reath! Are we stealin' Sweetheart?" the boy objected. "Chris—he sure thinks a lot of that mare. He'll miss her awful. We hadn't better do it."

She explained. "We're not stealing her. We'll leave her at Snider Junction with his Vinnie May. We can spend tonight with that outfit at Camp Springs and go on with them in the morning." She gave him a shove. "Scoot now. Mind sister."

As they rode away on the mare's satiny back the camp was quieting. Chris would win over Elam, Reatha knew that. He would have his Vinnie May. She hated to leave Nate and Candace who had been so good to her. But Elam was bent on sending them back to Muddy Bend.

There was some ease in motion as they rode through the night. A cool, sage-scented breeze whipped and cooled her cheeks. Benjy was behind her, his clamped arms biting into her waist.

"Sister, can't I get off for a while?" he whimpered after a time. "I'm gettin' kinda seasick."

"Stick on a little longer, honey. We can't be far from Camp Springs now. See? There's the glow of their fires ahead."

Sweetheart reared suddenly, nearly throwing them off. "She smells something," Benjy said. "She smells something funny and so do I. Let me off, Reath."

She slid off with him, sharing the mare's uneasiness. An acrid smell was in the air, like burning feathers. And a stillness was over them like a heavy blanket. There was no living sound—and forty or more persons with their livestock were supposed to be camped just over the rise ahead.

Caution born of the trail made Reatha tether the mare and clutch the boy's hand as they went forward slowly, stealthily, to the ridge. From it they looked down into the sheltered lowland, their gaze directed by a red glow.

It was a valley of death, of silent, awful death. The wagons that had been there, ten in number, were smouldering red ruins. Feathers, gutted from pillows and bed ticks floated in the night breeze like small, ghostly souls. Not a living thing was to be seen. . . .

AFTER one long look Reatha backed away, keeping her body between Benjy and the terrible sight. It was a bad thing to imprint on his young mind. This was the train they had been following for so long. She thought of the walnut dresser and the baby shoe and her heart cramped. They had known so little about making camp. Probably, having learned of the treaty, they had not even posted a night guard.

With a sudden start her mind flew to that other train, now laxed in a feeling of false security after their scare. This could happen to them. —Chris—Nate and Candace—

"We've got to go back!" she told her brother as they hurried toward Sweetheart. "They've got to know."

"We'd better light out for the Junction," Benjy whimpered pulling at her hand. "Ole Elam won't believe us no more. He'll say we stole Sweetheart—and are liars."

"We can't help what he says, we've got to go back. You don't want the Indians to surprise attack Chris, do you?"

"They'd never get Chris," the boy stated proudly. "He could lick every one of 'em. And if they caught me I'd give the whimperin' owl signal Chris and me's got and he'd come and save me. But maybe—yes I guess we'd better go tell 'em."

They mounted the mare and started east, hugging the heaviest tree shadows, keeping so close to the sycamores that they could hear the disturbed movements of the roosting turkeys in the topmost branches.

"Keep sharp ears, honey," Reatha advised the boy. "We mustn't run into a bunch of Indians."

It was only minutes later that the arms about her waist tightened spasmodically. "Reath! Reath!"

She reined up sharply and felt his hot breath against her back. "I hear horses comin'," he gasped in a hoarse whisper.

They slid off to stand silent and still in the deepest shadows. The girl caught the mare's velvet nostrils in time to pinch back her whistle. She could not quiet the restless feet, though. Sweetheart stepped on a dry stick that snapped like a pistol shot.

Those other riders must have heard it too, for all was a sudden, ominous quiet. Reatha could hear the pound of the boy's heart, could feel the mare's skin twitch under her hand. She had to fasten her fingers into the thick mane and hang on for dear life to keep her from breaking away. Out there in the dark was something that affected Sweetheart queerly. It was either Indians or—it was Chris.

"Benjy, honey," Reatha whispered. "You've got to make your owl call. Not too loud or too fast. Now don't be scared. Do it just like Chris showed you—with the one crippled note. Pucker up right now. Mind sister."

It was the worst call he had ever made, weak and shaky, but it was enough. Enough to bring a crashing through the brush—enough to make Chris himself call out.

"Benjy! Benjy, lad—"

A LIGHTED torch licked a hole in the darkness and shone upon the faces of

Chris, Nate and Elam and others behind them. The sad story was soon told. Elam Frink pronounced it a lie and rode on with the others toward Camp Springs, leaving only Nate and Chris with the girl and boy.

Suddenly Benjy was at Chris, wrapping his long arms around the man, sobbing against him with all the abandon of his frightened little soul.

"Chris! We wasn't stealin' Sweetheart!" he cried. "We was goin' to leave her with Vinnie May. And we was comin' back to warn you. You'll make ole Elam believe me, won't you?"

Chris stooped to the boy's size and put his arms about the skinny frame and held it tight. His voice was broken when he said gently, "Benjy, lad, Elam's goin' to thank you as soon as he understands. Because if you hadn't stopped us we'd all have been camped at Camp Springs when these renegade Indians struck. We might have drove them off—and we might have been killed. They never thought of lookin' for a train back where we stopped."

The sobs diminished but the thin shoulders still slumped. To the sputter of Nate's torch he said, "I shouldn't ought to have read that letter, Chris—about Vinnie May."

Chris's laugh was low and soft in his throat. "Never do things by halves, lad. If you'd read it all you would have seen that the picture was sent me so I would know the girl when I saw her. You see she's goin' to Oregon to wed a friend of mine out there. I'm to look after her on the way. But she won't be in my wagon, Benjy. It'll be just you and me—unless—"

Though he spoke to the boy Reatha knew it was for her—every word, and she stood as still as the sycamore behind her and listened.

"Now if I'd a been this Oregon man you bet I wouldn't have waited so long," he resumed. "I'd have met her at Snider Junction and wouldn't anything have kept me from it. I'd have hunted me up a parson and had me a weddin' right there. Once a man sees a girl likes him there's no sense waitin'—"

The boy became excited, his voice was shrill and high. "Chris! Here's Reath! She's been sayin' she wants to wed up with a Oregon man. Chris—won't you—"

Nate interrupted with a gusty laugh and reached a hand down for the boy. "You come ride back with me, Benjy. Let's go see what Ma can find us to eat."

Chris gave him a push forward. "Sure, lad. You be the first to tell them how we escaped the Indians. And maybe I'll think over what you suggested just now."

Reatha came to stand beside Chris and said to the boy, "Go with Nate, honey. Mind sister, now."

For she knew her Oregon man when she saw him. And right soon she was going to be telling him there could never be anyone else, not since the time she had seen a tall, black-hatted stranger send a star-faced bay mare into the browny waters of the old Platte River.

FIND THE REASON!

There was a young cowgal of Wactive,
Around whom the swains were all active—
She could rope, she could shoot,
Ride buckers to boot—
But that wasn't what made her attractive!

—Pecos Pete

Stranger in the Saddle

By Art Kercheval

DEX LANNING plunked his two moneybags down in front of the cashier's cage.

"Sold them fullbloods," he said. "There's the cash."

Cashier Henry Truesdale's eyes bulged. "You must be making money hand over fist." He counted the contents of the bags.

Dex grinned a little, nodding. "Ride the horse before he throws you, Henry. Salt it away while you can." He hitched up his belt, then accepted the receipt. "Some day I'll have a ranch they'll talk about."

He turned on his heel, then, and strode from the bank, his spurs jingling. He built a cigarette. Not too long into the future, he told himself, Marie would have everything she wanted. All she'd have to do was name it, and Dex would only have to snap his fingers to get it for her. It meant waiting a while, of course. A little pinching, so that bank account could pile up. But Marie was made of stern stuff. She had been the pick of all the girls in the Manna Valley country. He hummed a tune.

Taking a satisfied pull on his smoke, he walked down the boardwalk of Manna town, not in too much of a hurry. It was tempting just to look into store windows and see the things the Lannings were going to have some day. He paused before the millinery store and eyed a cheery blue Sunday-go-to-meeting hat. He pictured it on Marie. It would set her off well. Before very long, as a cattle baron's wife, she'd have a dozen hats of all colors and shapes. Marie Lanning would have a fine wardrobe, he decided, tossing away his smoke.

He rode back toward the ranch in a contented mood. Marie would be pleased they'd got so much for the herd, and Marie would say he was so dead right in being thrifty. Folks who squandered everything they made, Marie said, just ended up in the county poorhouse. Dex considered himself mighty lucky in having someone as understanding as Marie.

Coming into his little spread, he off-saddled, knowing supper would be just about ready. His steps were hurried ones of a hungry man, even for the same old fare of sidemeat and boiled potatoes.

Marie played a game that almost got her into trouble. . . .

"Marie—" he threw the door open wide —"I've done it! And got back a day early, too!"

SHE WAS in his arms, just as she'd been hundreds of times before when he'd come home from a long ride. But she turned from his kiss.

"I'm glad, Dex," she said, stepping back. "Glad those fullbloods fetched your price."

He came in and slapped his hat on the peg. Marie busied herself jostling pans on the stove. She was efficient, he thought, bed being made up right after breakfast, her home tidied every day. He sat down in the chair and pulled off his boots, easing himself. It was then that he stiffened, noticing the two cigarette stubs in the saucer on the table.

"So somebody's been here," he said.

She turned and nodded, looking at him. "There was a man here."

"And you smoked one," he said deliberately. "He the other."

"Of course we did." She took a steaming pot from the stove, set it on the kitchen bench, lifted off the lid.

"Uh-huh." Dex got out his own cigarettes. "What'd he want?"

She glanced up from filling his plate. "Passing through," she said. "Got himself a drink at the well. I invited him in."

He smoked for a while, reflecting on this. "Never knew you to let in strangers before," he said thoughtfully.

"This one seemed different." She paused a moment, fussed with her hair. "I'm glad I did. He was kind of lonely."

"Lonely?"

"But he had education—breeding. You could tell it the first two minutes with him," she went on. "Barbed-wire drummer. We talked about a million things. Cattle. Big cities. People." She shrugged then. "But you better set up and eat."

Dex did, sock feet and all. Sidemeat and boiled potatoes, the way it should be. He ate slowly, thinking about the man. What was his name? What did he look like? He finished with a frown, and rose.

"Don't hurry," she said. "We have cake."

He blinked. It had been last Christmas since they'd had cake. Cakes were a little on the luxury side, reserved for special occasions. Now he knew this must have been a special occasion. She had baked this chocolate layer cake especially for the man.

She had another piece with him, pouring coffee for each. She ate like she was proud of that cake—or maybe she wasn't even thinking of the cake at all. She had every reason to be proud, if she was, though. It was a wonderful cake.

He got up, still wondering about the man, wondering how many saddle miles he was away from here by now. How long had he stayed? He paced—and listened to Marie, singing while she washed the dishes.

HE CROSSED over to the wall shelf where his razor lay. But maybe he'd let the shaving go, get himself some sleep. It was a tough ride he'd had. He was tired, dead tired.

Two empty glasses stood there, looming large in his eyes. They looked cheerfully companionable, standing side by side, he thought. They must have been quite companionable, for they had contained whisky. He went quickly to the cupboard and pushed the curtains back. The quart of whisky Uncle Joe had given them a year ago New Year's was still there, but some of it was missing. That shouldn't have been. They were saving it, if he remembered, for a party some day.

"I had to be hospitable," Marie said quickly. "And he appreciated it."

He nodded, and his eyes went back to the glasses. There were things he could say—or maybe there wasn't anything to say, at all. He turned once more to face her, as if seeing her for the first time. Or the last.

She stooped and picked up his bedroom slippers from beside the stove.

"Better put them on," she said, facing him. "It isn't summer yet."

The slippers in the kitchen? What had gone on here?

She seemed to read his thoughts. "He was so tired, Dex. A man has a right to take off his boots when he's that tired. He protested, but I insisted. He rested himself in your chair, stretching out his feet. I never

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saw a more pleased man." She breathed a little sigh. "It was wonderful, watching him."

"It was going too far," Dex suggested, with firmness.

"Perhaps," she said.

He resumed his pacing. She wasn't hiding anything, that was certain. She wanted him to know. Everything had to be above-board, then, or she'd have destroyed the evidence. Because she was true as the Book and because he loved her, he had married her.

"I'm going to bed," he announced. He yawned. Well-being had seemingly returned to him.

"No—" the word slipped from her. "I—I didn't—"

She hastened toward the back room, opening and closing the door after her. He heard her straightening things.

Next morning, he was up before the sun.

"You're not going to start branding the culls this early!" She sat up, startled.

"No," he shook his head. "Tomorrow will be soon enough."

He went in the buckboard to Manna, and it was late afternoon when he finally returned.

"I squandered," he confessed. "Here's that hat that was in Wilson's store—the blue Sunday-go-to-meeting one. Here's some church-going shoes, too. I remembered your size. And just wait'll you see the red dress and—"

"Oh, Dex. Oh, Dex—"

"I know I shouldn't have," he cut in. "I even got some duds for myself. It may mean slim pickings for a year. You always said to save, but it was mostly me putting the words in your mouth. Not that we don't believe in a bank account, but we believe in whooping it up, now and then. Being crazy once in a while, too."

Marie said "Amen" to that. Dex could never be convinced enough about her visitor to get angry and accusing, she guessed with fingers crossed, and she couldn't afford to tell him.

Marie Lanning wouldn't say a word about Dex's own unsmoked cigarettes, and the whisky tossed into the yard. Let there always be the memory of the man.

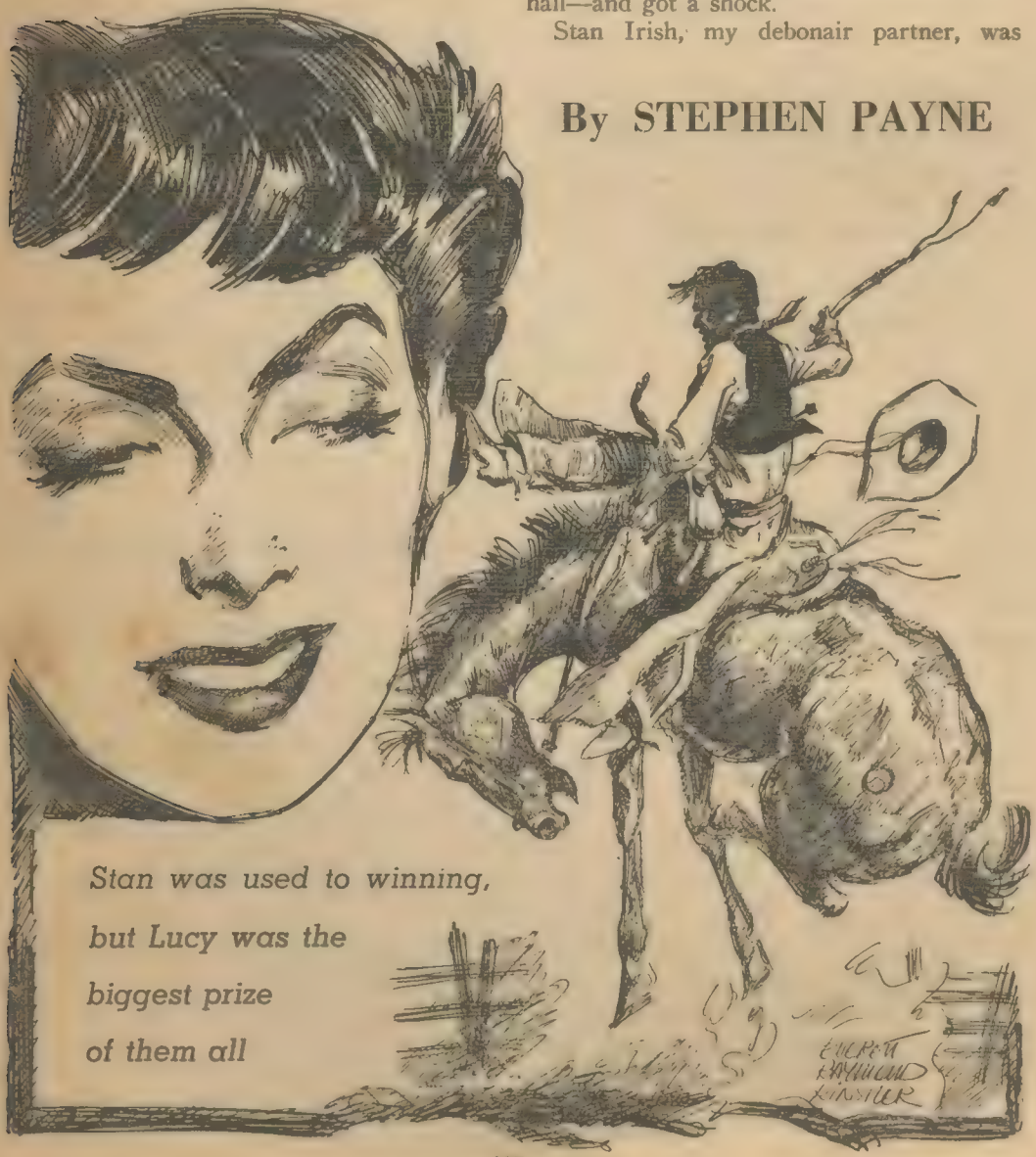
Change Partners

I WAS a mite too old to care about the dance in Spurlock that June evening following the rodeo. But I told my young partner to enjoy himself; that I'd sit in on a poker game.

It wasn't difficult to find one, but I made the mistake of playing with strangers. Toward eleven o'clock they took my last two-bits, and I took myself to the dance-hall—and got a shock.

Stan Irish, my debonair partner, was

By STEPHEN PAYNE



Stan was used to winning, but Lucy was the biggest prize of them all

dancing with the prettiest gal in the room. She had more than verve and grace, more than silky brown hair, blue eyes and healthy outdoor color. She was so alive she sparkled, and her smiles were all for Stan.

Other couples stopped to watch those two, for Stan was dancing with the same unconscious ease and class he had shown when he had won the calf roping and the bronc riding that very afternoon. Six feet, and slender, with closely clipped black hair, sun-darkened face and twinkling brown eyes which attracted women as a flower attracts bees, Stan was feeling his oats tonight. Trust him to pick the most attractive girl in town—and hynotize her. Okay, if he wasn't serious. But if he was. . . .

I hardly noticed that a woman had settled into the seat beside me until I heard her say, "I'm thinking of killing a man."

That brought my attention full upon her, and I made the same sort of noise I'd have made if a horse had kicked me in the stomach and knocked the wind out of me.

"I'm Mrs. Pete Larkins," she said. "I know you're Dusty McLeod, 'cause I saw you and your partner at the rodeo this afternoon and asked about you. . . I don't like the way that Stan Irish is monopolizing my daughter. Ken Palmer doesn't like it either."

Since Stan and I had come to this range and taken jobs with the Hatchet outfit, I'd heard about Pete Larkins' widow and her daughter Lucy who were living on the small L P farm. Now that I was meeting Mrs. Pete I found evidence that at the same age she must have been every bit as attractive as her daughter. But hard work and worry and a harsh climate had left their marks. No gay lights in her eyes such as shone from Lucy's; no animated smile on her lips.

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. "Don't frighten me, Mrs. Pete. Who'd you like to kill? Stan?"

Mrs. Pete gave a start. Her lips moved. But she didn't put her thoughts into words, and I watched a clean-cut young man, wearing a hundred dollar suit and a frown, cut in on Stan and Lucy.

Lucy's smile followed Stan as he turned away, but when the girl had settled into her new partner's arms, I saw the smile was gone. "Isn't that Ken Palmer?" I asked.

Mrs. Pete nodded. "Did you know that Lucy's practically engaged to him?"

I searched a pigeon hole of my brain for some gossip I'd heard: " 'Engaged to Kenneth J. Palmer, the son of Spurlock's most prominent family,' " I quoted. "And Mrs. Buford Charles Kenneth Palmer is the belle mare of—"

" 'Belle mare'? Not so loud, Dusty. Shush! . . . You've no idea how long and hard I've worked, how Pete and I pinched and slaved to send Lucy to college so she'd acquire culture and social grace; what plans I've made and wires I've pulled to bring about this engagement. Now it can all be wrecked because a fascinating, devil-may-care rodeo cowboy—"

"Stan's no rodeo cowboy," I put in testily. "For five years I've been teaching that boy cow-savvy and horse-savvy, training him for a range foreman's job. Mrs. Pete, Stan's my one colt, like Lucy's your one chick, and I'm as ambitious for him as you are for—"

"Look!" interrupted the widow. "The crowd's leaving for the midnight supper, and your Stan's taken Lucy right from under Ken Palmer's nose. Ken brought her to the dance, too!"

"Stan would do that. He's got a way with hosses and cows—and ladies. But shucks, Stan ain't serious."

"Not serious? He asked for a job on my farm!"

I jumped as if a hornet had spurred me. "That's out!" I stated flatly. "We're ridin' on to Montana where a job with my old friend Jed Smith is all lined up for Stan. Jed runs fifteen thousand cattle, and still has open range."

"I asked Stan if he was a farmer," Mrs. Pete went on. "He said, 'I can brand a turkey or curry a pig, or—"

"And that's all he knows about farming. You slapped him down hard, Mrs. Pete? . . . I almost called you just 'Pete'."

" 'Pete's' okay, now the real Pete isn't here any more. No, I didn't turn Stan down. But I want to get your idea how to handle

this situation with him and Lucy."

"I can manage Stan all right," I said. "No female has hooked me, and I've taught Stan how to sidestep that same trap . . . s'posing now we take in the supper?"

She was suddenly wearing a wise smile. "Big talk, Dusty, but a clever woman could wrap you 'round her finger . . . supper? All right."

THE hotel dining room was packed and noisy. We sat down across from a highly decorative lady with a small, beaten-down man on one side and good-looking Ken Palmer on the other. Mrs. Pete said, "Mrs. Palmer, Mr. Palmer and Ken, I'd like to introduce Mr. Dusty McLeod."

Mrs. B.C.K.P. said, "How nice," and added snippishly, "Come, Kenneth and Ken. I've finished."

The beaten-down man gave her a confused look before he sprang up and pulled back her chair. Ken said, "How're you, McLeod?" and followed his mother. In Mrs. Pete's cheeks red spots blossomed and died while we ate in silence.

After I'd borrowed two dollars from Stan to pay for the feed, and Mrs. Pete and I found a fairly quiet corner in the lobby, I fired up my pipe and said, "You must know your daughter well enough so you can outsmart any of her notions."

"Of course I know Lucy. Right now, she's rodeo crazy; one reason Stan's made a hit with her. She's the same impetuous, adventurous and thrill-seeking girl I was at her age. I grew up in a rough mining camp, wouldn't listen to older heads and got badly burned . . . now if I oppose Lucy openly, I'm afraid she'll do something silly. I think the same is true of Stan, so suppose I pretend he's welcome to a job on my farm?"

"Where Stan goes, I trail along."

"To be honest with you, Dusty, I'd like to have both of you there. That is, if you'll help me!"

"I'll do it, Pete," I agreed solemnly. "So happens I was farm-raised and ran away from home at fifteen, preferring to follow a range cow rather'n a plow. A day or two of farm work and Stan'll be ready for the open range!"

At sundown the following evening, Stan and I plodded wearily to the L P ranch buildings from a wheat field we'd been irrigating all afternoon. In the forenoon, on our hands and knees, we had weeded a garden patch, sort of rooting out the weeds like foraging pigs. Speaking of pigs, Mrs. Pete had twenty-three, all sizes and ages, as well as sixteen sheep, fifty-six chickens, ducks and turkeys, not to mention cats and skim milk calves and one dratted skim milk colt.

Now all we had to do yet this evening was to wrangle and milk nine cows, separate the milk, slop the hogs, feed the skim milk calves and colt, care for some horses, including our own two saddlers and a pack horse, chop wood, lug water, shut the irrigation water off the garden, if it was wet enough—and maybe end up by churning.

One day of this should convince Stan he didn't want to settle down to farm life. But dancing down to the corral to help us came Lucy, easy on tired eyes in a blue and white gingham dress with a floppy straw hat on her brown curls. Stan apparently forgot every ache in his tired young frame as she helped him separate milk and feed calves.

When Mrs. Pete called us to supper there was desperation in her eyes. Her meals were a welcome change from our usual chuck-wagon fare of beef, biscuits and beans. And just seeing Lucy, animated, moving lightly, smiling and chattering, dressing up the weathered old log house and the farm like—like mountain flowers and bright leafy aspens dress up a bleak hillside on the range—was enough to start crazy thoughts and dreams even in my gloomy old brain. So what must she be doing to young, impressionable Stan? And t'other way around? I'd better go tell Mr. Ken Palmer to tie down his spurs and get set for fast, rough riding if he was going to win.

After supper, Lucy and Stan disappeared. But I caught sight of them, riding away in the starlight, and asked grumpily, "Why didn't Palmer make a date with her for tonight, Pete?"

"Humph! He 'supposed Lucy'd be tired after the dance—but he does have her for tomorrow night."

"Our plan's working—in reverse," I

grumbled and moseyed off to bed.

THERE being no bunkhouse, Stan and I'd put our bedroll in a small woodshed opening off the kitchen. Now, when I looked into that shed, I didn't like it. Not enough air, and too much farm animal company. I grabbed a blanket and a pillow, bedded down in the hay loft, and dreamed I was telling Jed Smith, "Here's the boy I've been training for you. I've brought him up the ladder from horse wrangler to top, all 'round cowhand. For Stan, the day's work's never too long, come hail or wind or snow storm, the going's never too touch. What he don't know about rounding up, branding, trailing, shipping, you don't know either. Take him, Jed."

This was the satisfying dream out of which I came awake, hearing hoofbeats. Stan and Lucy coming home? Maybe he'd kiss her when he lifted her down. I jumped to the hay hole at the front of the loft for a quick look.

The moon was riding high, making plenty of light; making silver on the sage. The sort of night a man loves when singing to a bedded herd.

There they were, Stan and Lucy. I couldn't really see their faces, but after he helped her dismount, he held her close until at last she struggled free and ran to the house. Stan stood like a post, gazing after Lucy for three or more minutes before he took care of the horses and moseyed to the woodshed.

I hardly slept at all for the rest of the night, and at daybreak I hurried to the woodshed. Atop it were roosting seven turkeys, inside, a pig in one corner, four sheep in another, and the skim milk colt bedded close to Stan's bunk. I shook him.

A groan. "My nightherd shift already?" he muttered. Then he sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Where am I? . . . oh, on the L P farm! Dusty, don't ask me to milk or slop hogs. I'm fed up on all that; ready to head for Montana."

"All right, Stan. That's what I wanted to hear you say. Now, we'll hit the trail . . . umm? What about you and Lucy?"

He stretched his arms. "That's off," grinning, as unconcerned as if he hadn't worried me and Mrs. Pete, and probably Ken Palmer, half to death. "Lucy only wanted me to teach her some riding tricks and to rope. Last night I told her I'd never live on a farm or in town, because I'm all for the open range or for rodeo stuff."

"Rodeo stuff? Rodeo stuff!"

"Why not?" Stan defied me. "A top contestant can make enough in one season to buy a two-bit cattle ranch. But don't worry. I'll string right along with you, pard. I owe it to you."

He'd string along with me. He felt he owed me his loyalty! But thinking of Lucy, I growled, "Let's get this straight, doggone you. Lucy understands?"

"Take it easy, Dusty. She's nuts about Palmer, really. Now let me sleep."

I'm kind to animals, yet I soundly cuffed the colt and sheep and the pig out of the woodshed. Then I thought, what am I mad about? If he and Lucy are off each other, that's what Mrs. Pete and I want!

I'd built a fire in the kitchen range when Mrs. Pete came from her room. Worry wrinkles in her nice face, worry in her sleep-hungry eyes. "Morning, Dusty. Hitch a team to the buckboard. I've got to go to town right away."

"To see Ken Palmer, I suppose. But there's no need for the trip now, Pete. Stan's agreed to ride on with me."

"Thank God." Mrs. Pete flung her arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Whoa!" I stammered, liking it, but feeling my neck and ears redden.

NOT to be outdone, though, I was giving Pete a better smack than she'd given me when Lucy ran into the kitchen, and stopped as short as a horse meeting a bear. "Mother, this is a surprise! Now you won't be alone on the L P after I marry Ken."

"Hold it, young un," I gulped. But Lucy stood on tiptoe and planted a daughterly peck on my stubbled cheek. "Dusty, I like you and I want you to know this is all right with me."

I was a wooden man with a foolish grin while the girl laughed at my confusion. "I'll go see Ken right away," she said. "He's

been worried, too, Mother, about what you'd do after he and I are married."

"How about Stan, Lucy?" asked Mrs. Pete.

Lucy had gone toward the living room door. She stopped with her back toward us and was completely still. "He's only a fiddle-footed cowboy who never really meant anything at all to me. Not anything at all." But her voice rose hysterically and then broke as she turned quickly and ran out of the house.

I grabbed the milk pails and clumped out to the barn, where I found Lucy saddling her pony, apparently eager to get to Spurlock and see the man she'd been neglecting. Yet I could see she was as nervous as a penned wildcat.

"Lucy," I asked, "are you plumb sold on living either on a farm or in a small town?"

She darted a half-suspicious glance from under her heavy lashes. "The answer is 'No'! The truth is, I'd love to be a top-flight trick and fancy rider. Stan showed me several stunts last night." Her luminous eyes sparkled the way they had in the dancehall. "He said—it doesn't matter what he said—gangway!" She was up in the saddle as effortlessly and gracefully as any cowboy. "I'm going to patch things up with Ken Palmer."

I jumped to avoid the rush of her horse, dropped the milk pails, and hurried to the woodshed. A cackling hen had laid an egg on Stan's bed, the skim milk colt had pried open the door and was chewing the top of one of Stan's fancy boots. I rescued the boot and kicked the colt. It kicked back and hit me. But I wasn't paying attention.

"Stan, look here! All that guff about you and Lucy. What's the truth?"

He sat up. "All right. You asked for it, Dusty. She isn't going to disappoint and hurt her mother."

My mouth was dry, and I hesitated. Had I any right to upset Mrs. Pete's plans? Damn it, yes, because both of us were wrong!

"Lucy know what she's letting herself in for?" I demanded.

"She knows old man Palmer is tied to Mrs. B.C.K.P.'s saddle horn, and young

[*Turn page*]

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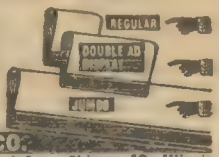

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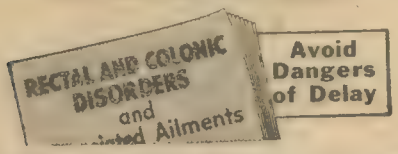

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Ken comes running when she whistles. Lucy knows—even if Mrs. Pete doesn't—that this Palmer woman will make life plain hell for her daughter-in-law. But, as I've said, to please Mrs. Pete, Lucy's—hi! what's biting on you, pard?"

"Plenty! Fork your horse, Stan, cut across country and catch Lucy before she reaches town."

"Why?"

"Don't ask fool questions. Lucy'll string along with you when you're taking in rodeos. That's what you really want, 'spite of all my—Stan, you'll know what to do when you catch her, and if you disappoint Lucy and me—me, mind you!— I'll break your neck."

"Thanks, Dusty." Stan yanked on his boots without noticing that the colt had mangled one, legged it to the stable, saddled his horse like a relay race rider changing mounts, and was off.

I started doing chores; farm chores, the kind I'd hated when I was a kid. But now I was taking an interest in the cows, pigs, calves, chicks and everything. Seemed strange, yet nothing was turning out as I'd expected, and I dreaded explaining to Mrs. Pete why Stan had departed as if a posse was after him.

A COUPLE of hours had passed when a man rode up, and Mrs. Pete stepped out into the yard. "Hello, Sheriff Stigers."

Stigers began to tell Mrs. Pete about somebody robbing the hotel safe in town. Likely the thief had hopped a train and made a clean getaway. Nevertheless, the sheriff had combed Spurlock, and was now riding to neighboring ranches to warn folks to be

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on the lookout for any suspicious character.

I crossed the yard and lined up beside Mrs. Pete. "Any other exciting news in town, Sheriff?"

"Yes. But I supposed you two knew all about that. About your Lucy and Stan Irish getting a marriage license."

Mrs. Pete's accusing eyes met mine. "Dusty McLeod, can you explain this?"

I hunched a shoulder. The sheriff said, "I

nigh forgot. Here's a note Lucy said to give you, Mrs. Pete."

"How'd Ken Palmer take it?" I asked.

"Ken? Well, nobody really knows. He just echoes his mother, and she said, 'We are quite relieved.'" Sheriff Stigers put his horse to a lope.

I felt queer and guilty. But I stood my ground, looking uneasily at Mrs. Pete, as she read Lucy's note aloud:

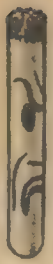
Mother dear:

Please try to forgive me and come to town at once for our wedding. Stan and I want to catch a train and reach Redstone for a rodeo tomorrow afternoon. We'll take our horses along in a stock car. This is what both of us really want to do, and it makes me so very sure Stan is the right man for me. Bring Dusty and come right away.

Love, Lucy.

Mrs. Pete crumpled the note and gazed to

[*Turn page*]



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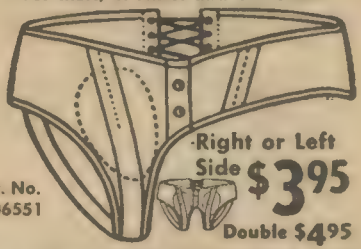

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the distant mountains beyond her farm. "'The wisest plans of mice and men,'" she quoted. Then, "Dusty, I've been a blind and selfish fool."

"About your one chick? Like me about my one colt?"

Her hands made an impatient gesture. "It's come to me that Lucy was about to make the mistake of marrying the wrong man."

I nodded. "Yes, Pete, it would never have worked."

"Dusty, you realized it! Is that why you sacrificed your dream of making Stan a great range foreman and sent him after Lucy?"

"Pete, there was more at stake than my ambition for Stan and yours for Lucy. I did it because I love those two kids—almost as much as I love you . . . now that I've met the right woman I'd like much to take up farming as a steady job."

Watching Pete closely, I saw the worry was gone from her eyes. They were bright, untroubled, happy as she laughed and said, "This farm does need a good man, and now you've lost one partner, you might—"

I didn't let her finish.

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PAYS BENEFITS FOR FULL STAY IN HOSPITAL

MAIL COUPON

COSTS ONLY **Pennies a Day**

WE PAY CASH DIRECT TO YOU

IN ADDITION TO WHAT YOU MAY COLLECT FROM OTHER INSURANCE

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

SO SUDDEN!

Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere in U.S. & Possessions! If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

WHO'S NEXT?

HAPPY DAY!

ACCIDENTAL DEATH, SURGERY, POLIO INCLUDED

We give you more coverage, better coverage, longer coverage at low cost. You get generous Hospital Room and Board Benefits for sickness or accident (rest homes, sanitariums and Govt. Hospitals excluded) . . . you get Cash Benefits for 73 Surgical Operations . . . Lump Cash for accidental death . . . Cash Payment for loss of eyes, hands, feet . . . special Polio Protection, etc. One Policy covers individual or entire family, birth to age 75. You'll see the low costs in the booklet we send you. DON'T TAKE CHANCES — BE PROTECTED. Send for our FREE BOOK which tells all about this remarkable insurance.

DON'T WAIT TILL IT'S TOO LATE! ACT NOW!

POLICY BACKED BY STRONG RELIABLE COMPANY

We do business in all 48 states and U. S. possessions. Claims are paid promptly in strict accordance with Policy provisions.

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NORTH AMERICA

Wilmington 99, Delaware

Mail Coupon for **FREE BOOK**

NO OBLIGATION
NO AGENT WILL CALL

RUSH COUPON FOR VALUABLE FREE BOOK

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NORTH AMERICA

Dept. 553-TG Wilmington 99, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, full details about your new, low cost NO TIME LIMIT HOSPITAL Plan. No agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

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EXCITER